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CONKER'S BAD FUR DAY

CHRIS SEAVOR ON THE N64'S FOUL-MOUTHED MASTERPIECE

"IT WAS F**KING LUDICROUS!"

XBOX

SEAMUS BLACKLEY AND ED FRIES ON HOW MICROSOFT POWERED ITS WAY INTO CONSOLE GAMING



ATARI 2600 40 YEARS



THE COMPLETE HISTORY OF YS

BEHIND THE SCENES OF GAMING'S UNSUNG RPG SERIES

RE-ENERGISING METROID

HOW MERCURYSTEAM AND NINTENDO UPDATED A CULT CLASSIC

Future
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THE RETROBATES

WHAT'S YOUR FAVOURITE XBOX GAME?



DARRAN JONES

Halo: Combat Evolved, if only because of the 16-player sessions I used to have in my front room every Saturday night.

Expertise:
Juggling a gorgeous wife, two beautiful girls and an award-winning magazine

Currently playing:
Super Mario Odyssey

Favourite game of all time:
Strider



NICK THORPE

Dead Or Alive Ultimate is still great to look at, and Xbox Live support meant I was never short of opponents back in the day.

Expertise:
Owning five Master Systems (I sold two)

Currently playing:
Danganronpa V3: Killing Harmony

Favourite game of all time:
Sonic The Hedgehog



DREW SLEEP

I'd annoy my parents by spending an inordinate amount of time playing *Halo: Combat Evolved* on the demo systems in PC World. It blew my tiny little mind at the time.

Expertise:
Functional hangovers

Currently playing:
Persona 5

Favourite game of all time:
Final Fantasy VIII



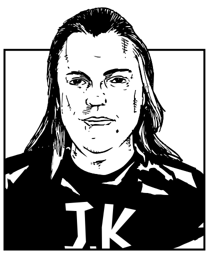
SAM RIBBITS

Easy - *Burnout 3: Takedown*. It's completely ridiculous which makes it super fun and the soundtrack was pretty great, too.

Expertise:
Pixels

Currently playing:
Cuphead

Favourite game of all time:
Croc: Legend Of The Gobbos



JASON KELK

It's tempting to say *Geometry Wars*, but *OutRun 2* is the one that I threw huge amount of time into.

Expertise:
Being a homebrew hero

Currently playing:
Scout

Favourite game of all time:
Io



GRAEME MASON

Call Of Cthulhu: Dark Corners Of The Earth, one of the most compelling and frightening games I've ever played.

Expertise:
Adjusting the tape azimuth with a screwdriver

Currently playing:
Terra Cresta

Favourite game of all time:
Resident Evil 4



DAVID CROOKES

For me, *Prince Of Persia: Sands Of Time* because of the way it revitalised the 2D game I loved so much on my CPC.

Expertise:
Amstrad, Lynx, adventures, Dizzy and PlayStation (but is it retro? Debate!)

Currently playing:
Uncharted: The Lost Legacy

Favourite game of all time:
Broken Sword



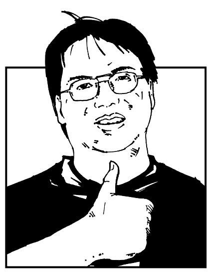
PAUL DRURY

I love *Stranger's Wrath* (it's also my favourite FPS) but I'll nominate *Crimson Skies*, which is like a fantastic update of *Combat* on the VCS.

Expertise:
Atari shenanigans

Currently playing:
Batalyx

Favourite game of all time:
Sheep in Space



ANDREW FISHER

Burnout 3: Takedown – the first Xbox game I ever played, and it's awesome.

Expertise:
Commodore 64 and Nintendo player for over 30 years

Currently playing:
Demon's Crest

Favourite game of all time:
The Sentinel

LOADING...



I wasn't very invested in the Xbox when it was first announced. Yes, I knew it was coming, but I also knew that Microsoft specialised in PC games and I simply didn't care about the vast majority of them. Three weeks after the console's launch I played a few games at the Video Game Centre (rest in peace) and was absolutely blown away. I still maintain that it has one of the best launches of recent memory when it comes to sheer quality and breadth of available games, and it quickly become obvious to me that Microsoft was serious about taking Sony's crown.

Even today the likes of *Dead Or Alive 3*, *Halo: Combat Evolved*, *Project Gotham Racing*, *RalliSport Challenge* and *Amped: Freestyle Snowboarding* hold up exceptionally well. Graphically and mechanically they show their age, but playing through *Halo* co-op with my cousin last year highlighted the sheer scope and ambition of Bungie's game, an ambition and experience that's rarely been matched since. The Xbox is also the last console I can remember that genuinely felt like it was the most powerful gaming device on the planet. Even the PCs of the time seemed to pale in comparison to its grunt, while the ability to play your own music in games led to many enjoyable hours on *Amped*'s slopes. As a jaded 29-year-old the Xbox reignited my love for games, particularly with the introduction of Xbox Live and it led to me applying for a job on *XBM*. I didn't get it, but I did get offered news editor on *games™*, which had a section about retro games, another passion of mine.

Enjoy the magazine!





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>> Load 174 Breathing new life into classic games

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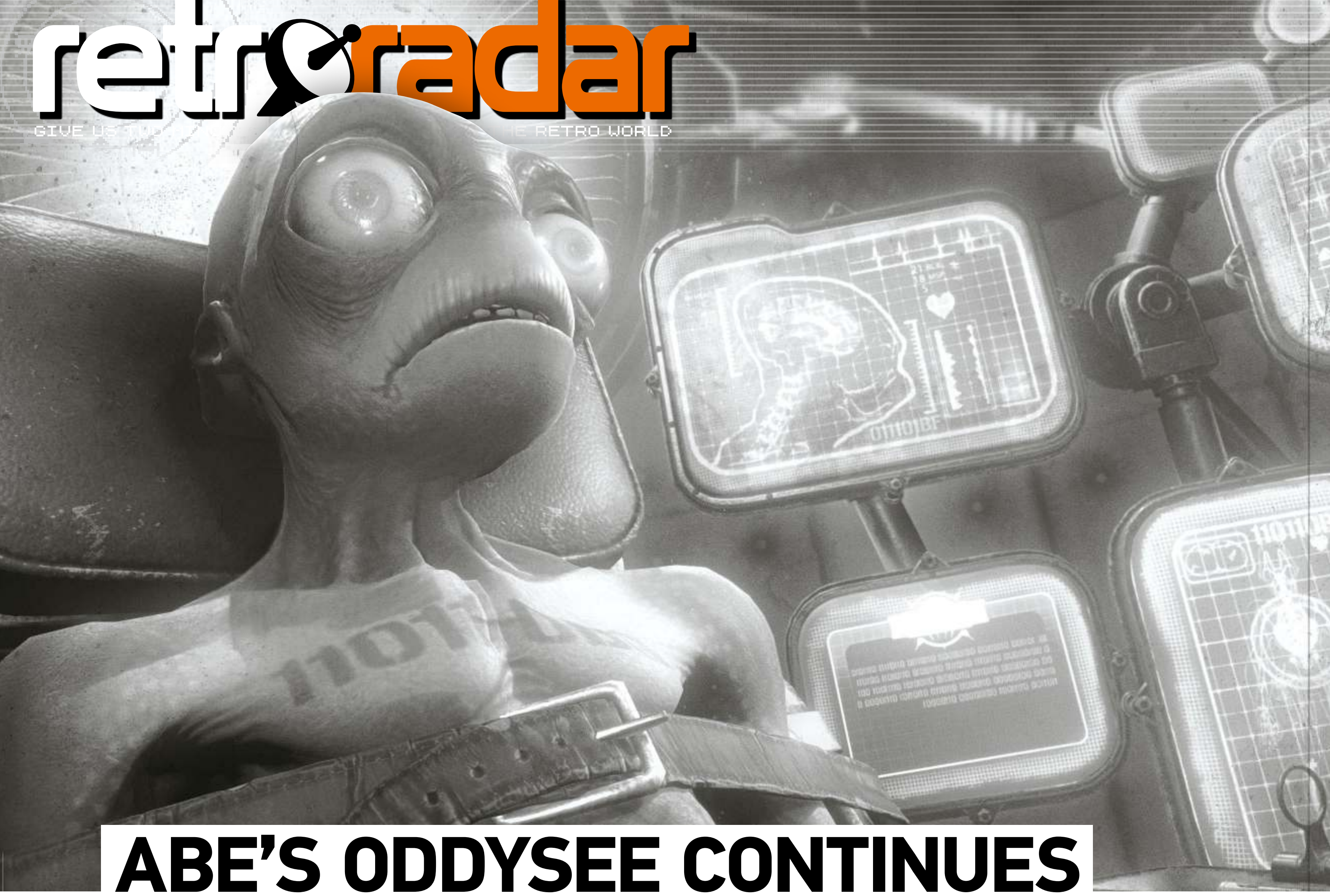


"Multiplayer map design is very, very difficult. It's difficult. It really is"

REVIEWS

ESSENTIALS





ABE'S ODDYSEE CONTINUES

Peter Chapman on updating a PlayStation classic for a new generation

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The *Oddworld* series has been entertaining gamers since the release of *Abe's Oddysee* in 1997. Just Add Water revisited the classic game and overhauled it for modern systems by releasing *Oddworld: New 'N' Tasty* in 2014, and now it's time for a new developer to continue the story with *Oddworld: Soulstorm*, a reimagining of *Oddworld: Abe's Exoddus*. We spoke to Fat Kraken Studios' Peter Chapman to find out more.

How long has *Soulstorm* been in development for?

We started in earnest at the beginning of 2016, investigating technology and fleshing out our toolsets. One of the first things we did was to start to figure out what we would keep from previous titles and what we'd do completely fresh – ultimately, it's much more of the latter than the former, but we went through a lengthy discovery process figuring out what would work in today's landscape and what might feel dated and simply not fun.

The very early process is about finding what makes Abe work as a character and how we make sure our games stay true to that. Abe's journey is one of discovering empathy for his fellow Mudokons and using that to motivate him through puzzling and dangerous landscapes to complete his objectives. This is really the starting point for any game where Abe is the central character and, as developers, we have to work with our toolsets – and constantly push those as far as we can – to deliver on that.



» [PC] *Soulstorm* is promising a far more advanced story than the original *Abe's Exoddus*.

What enhancements have you made since *New 'N' Tasty*?

Oddworld: Soulstorm was initially built on using pieces from *New 'N' Tasty*, and we're still championing Unity, but we've moved from the version used back in 2014 (v4.3) right through to the latest. To be honest, not a lot of *New 'N' Tasty* remains, even at this stage in development: Abe is more mobile and unrestricted in his movement and controls; enemies are much more intelligent and responsive; the Mudokons feel more alive; and visually we've moved on considerably.

It's fair to say that very little remains of the previous game. Mechanically, it's a very different experience – and while we're keeping most of that under wraps at the moment we're hopeful that once we do reveal Soulstorm fully the differences will become very clear.

Will *Soulstorm* feature any new sections?

Soulstorm's a brand-new game and won't actually feature any of the same encounters. Each platform, each jump, each puzzle, each enemy, they'll all feel new. Abe might visit some of the same overall locations in terms of the storyline but they won't ever play the same, or in most cases look the same.

The story has been rewritten. Is it going to be new or keep with *Exoddus'* original themes?

It's completely new, yes. It involves a couple of the same overarching themes



» [PC] The original *Abe's Exoddus* hasn't aged well visually, so we're looking forward to the remake.



» Peter Chapman works at Fat Kraken Studios, and previously worked on *Oddworld: New 'N' Tasty*.

> "I think a big part of Oddworld games has always been their storytelling"
> Peter Chapman

as *Exoddus*, but it's an entirely new story to go with an entirely new game. *Oddworld*'s traditionally kept some of its motifs and themes behind the gameplay layer and left a lot up to the player to gather and interpret, and that won't change here, we're just adjusting our focus a little from the sort of things the PSone games covered 20 years ago.

Our strong characterisation will be present and correct, too – we're at the visualisation stage of our cutscenes, for example, and they're really starting to push the storyline forward. The game will tread on some themes we've not really covered at *Oddworld* before, and we hope that our trademark humour still manages to shine, despite the obviously very bleak tone we've set.

What do you think makes Abe such a popular game character?

For me, personally, I think it's that he's such an unwilling hero. His motivation started out just being one of self preservation, he never wanted to be a saviour or have people looking up to him, he's just kind of landed in this situation and the only way to get out of it is to push through it. So he keeps on moving forward, trying to do the best he can in spite of showing no previous aptitude for heroic actions.

Why are there new character designs for the numerous Mudokon characters?

I think a big part of *Oddworld* games has always been their storytelling and worldbuilding. We have these fragile characters surrounded by danger and we want the player to empathise with them. The more relatable we can make them, through detailed characters and facial expressions, the more we hope the player will identify with their plight and sympathise with their predicament. The same ideas apply to the new Glukkon character designs. We want these characters to have their own personalities and for players to sense their motivations from more than just their actions or the dialogue that we put into them.

How much input does Lorne Lanning have?

Lorne's input is there in everything we do. As creative director, he has a hand in every single aspect of the project, no matter how seemingly trivial. This ensures that everything has a distinct, cohesive style and voice, and Lorne's with us constantly – every day – to ensure that not only does the work match up to the standards set by the brand and previous titles, but that it



» [PC] *Soulstorm* is being treated more as a 'retelling' of the events of *Exodus*, rather than a straight-up remake.

matches with his broader vision for the world he has created.

Are these remakes leading to a new *Oddworld* game?

Well, *Soulstorm* is a 'new' *Oddworld* game, so yes! It's the second in a quintology that we have planned, plotting Abe's evolution as a hero and the ripples that one act of defiance – running away from the board meeting at the beginning of *New 'N' Tasty* – sends out into the world. *Soulstorm* starts to expand the narrative beyond Abe, his factory and its immediate surroundings to tell a broadening story about how his actions are having an effect on society around him. In future games, we will keep expanding on those themes to show how the events of *Soulstorm* ripple out even further into Oddword's society. *

FUTURE REMAKES

A guess as what we can expect next



Oddworld: Munch's Odyssey

Although we've already received a HD port of *Munch's Odyssey*, we'd imagine that an enhanced remake in the style of *New 'N' Tasty* and *SoulStorm* is definitely on the cards. *Oddworld* seems intent on finally completing its quintology so it makes sense that a brand new version of the company's Xbox launch title will be remade next.



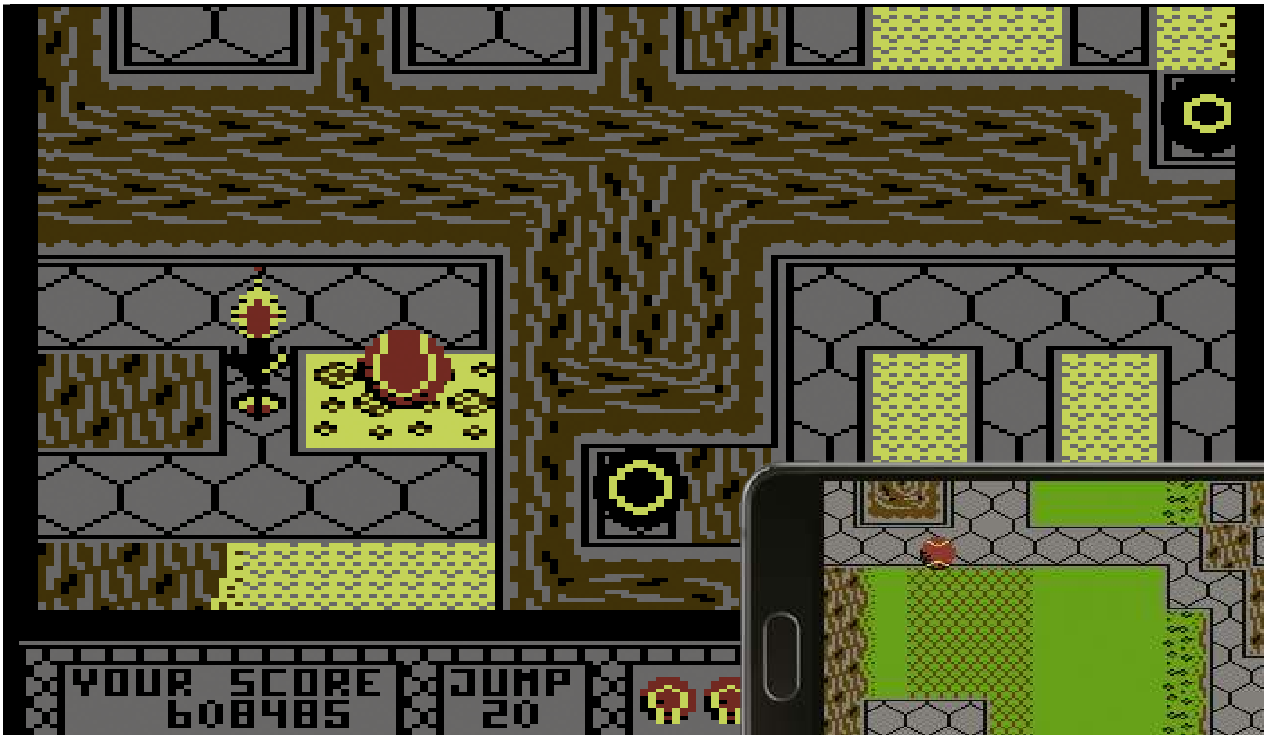
Oddworld: Stranger's Wrath

Like *Munch's Odyssey*, a HD update already exists for various consoles and it's very, very good. It's always been our favourite game in the series and it's always been the one that never gets the love it deserves. We're hoping that an enhanced version with improved game mechanics and new narrative will be something really special.



Oddworld: The Final Chapter

We've no idea what form this game will take, but it could be styled around *Oddworld: Squeek's Oddysee*, which at one point, was going to be the third game in the quintology. Ideally, we'd like a final epic adventure that lets you take control of every key character from the earlier games.



» [C64] *Bounder* was a big success on release, bouncing its way to a 97% review in *Zzap64!*.

» [iOS] *Bounder* is going to look extremely similar to the original versions. This is the C64 offering.



REBOUNDER

MATT RISLEY ON THE MOBILE RETURN OF BOUNDER

Matt Risley is in a happy mood. The developer from Swivel Creations/Lu Studios is currently involved in a brand-new version of the hit Gremlin game, *Bounder* and is working hard on an update of the 8-bit classic.

"Certain games stick in your head from back in the day and *Bounder* was one of those games, from how it looked, how challenging it was and, of course, the memorable music it had," he explains when we quiz him on bringing the classic game back. "The game is a classic and we felt that it would port really well to mobile, so I made some enquiries and contacted Ian Stewart (ex-owner of Gremlin Graphics), and we struck a deal to bring *Bounder* to mobile. It is very exciting. We are looking to launch the game in the first quarter of 2018 on iPhone and Android devices and we have a website covering our development of *Bounder* and the history at www.bounder.mobi. We are also looking at a Kickstarter campaign to boost the development and awareness."

It's worth noting that this isn't the first time Bounder has appeared on mobile – *Bounder's World* was released in 2011 – so we were keen to know how it would compare to that game, which is sadly no longer available to buy. "We are developing the games to be as close to the originals as possible, but how you control the ball will be a bit different as it will utilise the touchscreens now and more of the mobile screen resolutions," explains Matt. "We will give retro gamers really good value for money as our mobile game includes all three versions, the Commodore 64, Spectrum and Amstrad."

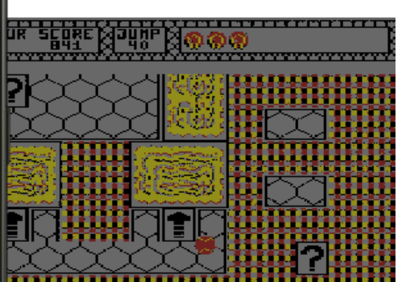
The *Bounder* IP is still owned by Ian Stewart so we were keen to know what involvement he or any other ex Gremlin staff have with the new remake. "I deal a lot with Ian Stewart and Chris Shrigley, the original creator of *Bounder*. Both Ian and Chris have said they would be happy to test the game when it's ready. Chris has been great to deal with, and is giving us lots of advice – he knows the game better than anyone!"

It's still some time before *Bounder* is released, but Matt is confident that if it is a success more Gremlin games will head to the iOS and Android platforms. He's also already crossed out the possibility of any unlockable versions of the original game, revealing, "There will be no need, as our versions will be very close to the originals, but just be presented slightly different." It's a sound idea and it's certainly worth getting excited about because the very nature of the game means it's perfectly suited for replication on touchscreen devices. Matt is clearly excited about the prospect of resurrecting *Bounder* for a new generation of gamers and he's convinced it's the right game to return to. "It was one of the biggest selling games of the Eighties", he concludes. "It just seems to be one of those games that is highly regarded and fondly remembered for its originality but also for its challenging gameplay, not forgetting that catchy tune!" *

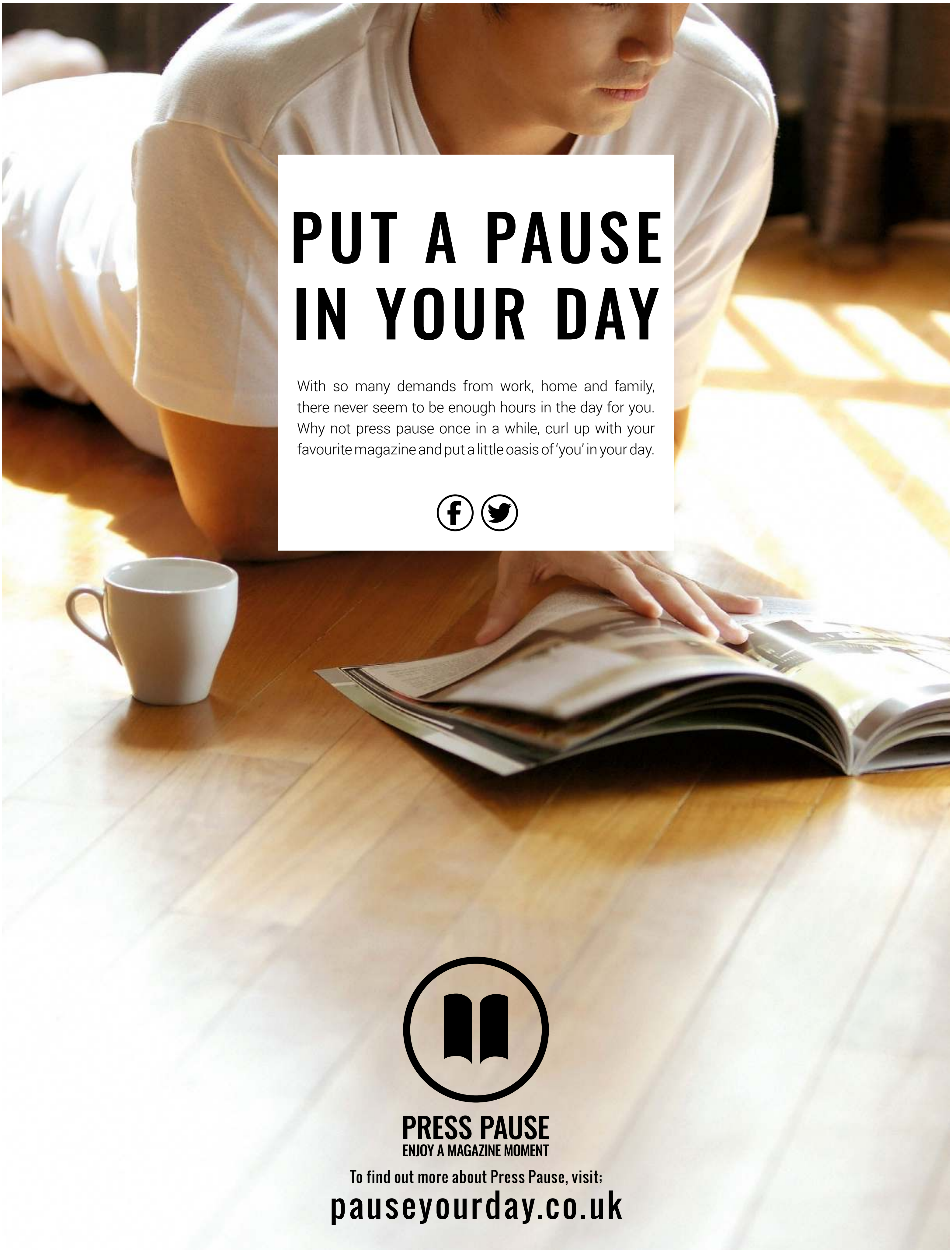


» Matt Risley and Swivel Creations is bringing *Bounder* to smartphones with Lu Studios.





» [C16] *Bounder's* popularity saw it appear on everything from the MSX to this Commodore 16 version.


PUT A PAUSE IN YOUR DAY
With so many demands from work, home and family, there never seem to be enough hours in the day for you. Why not press pause once in a while, curl up with your favourite magazine and put a little oasis of 'you' in your day.
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pauseyourday.co.uk

Mega Drive Redux

Become the envy of all your friends by sauntering around town with this swanky Mega Drive bag that's styled around the iconic Eighties console. This is a newly redesigned version of an earlier bag, and it now features super-tough polymers and a fully lined inside, meaning you can carry your Mega Drive around to a friends in style (or surprise them by pulling out a SNES Mini instead).
Price: £45 **From:** insertcoinclothing.com

Sonic Mania Soundtrack

One of the many things that *Sonic Mania* nailed was an authentic-sounding soundtrack that easily captured the chiptune brilliance of the earlier games. It's rather fitting then that Data Disks has created a standalone vinyl release that really allows Tee Lopes' memorable score to shine. While it comes on a single vinyl, it's housed in a very attractive gatefold that features fantastic art, and also includes a download code in lossy and lossless formats so you can listen to it wherever you go. Don't be surprised if this collector's edition sells out fast.
Price: £19.99 **From:** data-discs.com



PICK OF THE MONTH

Retron HD (NES Edition)

Hyperkin's latest device is everything you'd expect from the company. It allows you to play both PAL and NTSC games, upscales everything to a crisp 720p resolution and uses pure hardware, so you don't have to worry about any emulation issues. It's a lot cheaper than devices like the Retron 5, but this is reflected by that fact you can only play NES/Famicom games on it. A more authentic looking grey version is also available to buy.
Price: £49.99
From: funstockretro.co.uk

Neo-Geo: A Visual History

The latest effort from Bitmap Books is another gorgeous release that should find its way onto most coffee tables. While it's not massively in-depth in terms of behind the scenes interviews, it does excel in all other areas, thanks to an opening of the SNK vaults that has allowed Sam Dyer access to a whole host of incredible art, from flyers and box art to gorgeous production drawings. The photography throughout is of an incredibly high standard, while blueprints, and rare interviews with the likes of Tatsuhiko Kanaoka (Falcoon) and Yasuyuki Oda will have hardcore SNK fans in raptures. There's even a 'Master Game List' covering the MVS, AES and CD systems, if you're brave enough to dive into collecting. A lavish tome and exactly what we'd expect from Bitmap Books.
Price: £29.99 (standard), £49.99 (Collector's Edition)
From: bitmapbooks.co.uk

The Story Of The Commodore Amiga In Pixels

Fans of Chris Wilkins' '*In Pixels*' series will know what to expect from his latest book. He's once again teamed up with Roger Kean and delivered an entertaining read that's part-history lesson, part-visual feast. There's a great collection of games covered, including *Speedball II* and *Stunt Car Racer*, while the Memoirs section features anecdotes from over 20 key Amiga players, such as Archer Maclean and Phil Boag-Butcher (Galahad), who has been convered the likes of *Putty* and *Starquake* to the system.
Price: £24.99, £30 (hardback)
From: funstockretro.co.uk


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Here's my bio... Paul Rose
Paul Rose is probably better known as Mr Biffo – the creator and chief writer of legendary teletext games magazine *Digitiser*. These days, he mostly writes for kids TV, but can still be found rambling on about games, old and new, for his daily website, Digitiser2000.com.



First-person perfection

D*oom*. Coming for the Nintendo Switch. I honestly think I'm more excited for it than I am for *Super Mario Odyssey*. I've always wanted to be able to play first-person shooters on a handheld system. For me, it seems like a natural fit. Oh, I get that over the years the FPS genre has become more about cinematic spectacle and atmosphere than arcade-style blasting, but *Doom* – the recent, rebooted, *Doom* – recaptured what made the original so special. The thought of being able to shoot Cacodemons on the train just blows my mind.

For me, like for many of you, *Doom* was one of those watershed moments in my gaming life. At the time it came out, I was working on Digitiser for Channel 4 Teletext, and our PCs were creaking, steam-powered things, with just enough oomph to produce teletext visuals. We managed to get it running on one of our in-office machines, but had to reduce the play window to roughly the size of a postage stamp.

Nevertheless, nothing was lost for me. *Doom* still sent shivers down my spine. Not because of the atmosphere of foreboding that ran through it like a river of blood, but simply because I knew that I was looking at the future. It must have been like the first time anybody saw an aeroplane, or moving television pictures. I knew this was the way gaming would be going.

I bought my first decent PC purely to play first-person shooters. Specifically, I bought it to play *Star Wars: Dark Forces*; the combination of *Doom*-style action and graphics with the *Star Wars* universe was too much to resist. I couldn't afford it, but I felt I had no choice. I just *had* to own it; there was a revolution happening, and I refused to be left out.

For years, I was undiscerning in my tastes. If it was a first-person shooter, I bought it. History might not look so fondly upon some of the games I played, but the likes of *Hexen*, *Heretic*, LucasArts' unjustly forgotten *Outlaws* – even the long-forgotten *Redneck Rampage* – still rank among my favourite games of all time.

All these games moved the genre forward in increments. *Duke Nukem 3D* was more of a leap, but I remember that first time I got my hands on a sniper rifle in *Outlaws*. It was a real watershed.

There were hiccups along the way. The grimy, heavy metal, aesthetic of the original *Quake* never chimed with me (though I adored *Quake II*), Unreal caused my PC to kill itself out of shame when it couldn't handle the game's demands, and I never got the fuss about *Alien Vs Predator* on the Jaguar. Furthermore, I find too many modern FPS titles formulaic, more about shifting annual instalments than trying to move things on.

Nonetheless, if there's a genre that I see as 'my' genre, then it's the first-person shooter. If I had to choose one genre of game to take to a desert island – that would be it. And on that list would be the original *Doom*, postage stamp-sized playing window and all. *

Do you agree with Paul's thoughts? Contact us at:

RetroGamerUK @RetroGamer_Mag darran.jones@futurenet.com



Under The Hood

John Linneman provides in-depth technical analysis of retro games at Digital Foundry (digitalfoundry.net). We learn why he entered this unusual line of work…

We take great pleasure at peering behind the curtain of a game to discover the stories behind them. However, it's difficult for us to actually visually break down iconic videogames in depth. This is where John Linneman and Digital Foundry Retro comes in.

For readers who haven't seen your videos, can you please explain the type of analysis that you provide in your work for Digital Foundry Retro?
The DF Retro series of videos strives to provide a way to check out classic games running on real hardware captured via RGB while providing insight into their creation and history. It's a great way to celebrate these games while peeking under the hood. Back in the day, it was fun to debate which version of a game was superior but now, thanks to modern hardware, it's possible to gain a deeper understanding of these versions.

How did you become interested in retro gaming?
It kind of started in the late Nineties for me. While I was a huge Sega fan growing up, I missed the initial launch of the Sega Saturn and jumped into PC gaming for a while. Once the Dreamcast was announced in 1998, however, my latent love of Sega kicked in which prompted me to buy a Saturn and start collecting games for it. It wasn't exactly retro, but it was obviously on its last legs and I grew to love the system. From that point on, I kept every new game that I would purchase while simultaneously digging back into consoles I loved in the past and beyond.



» Myth busted: the Japanese Saturn version of *Tomb Raider* doesn't run any better than the PAL one.

Most technical analysis focuses on modern games – what drew you to analyse retro games in this way?
These days, console hardware is all relatively comparable and, aside from minor performance and visual differences, each iteration of a game is roughly the same. Classic consoles were often hugely different from one another, necessitating unique approaches to development. To make matters more interesting, separate developers were often contracted out for each platform conversion resulting in even more variations. I think it's fun to delve into each version of a classic game to better understand how developers approached each platform. It's especially interesting when you have games that share the same name, such as *Quake II* for PlayStation and N64, but are ultimately completely different experiences.



» DF Retro videos also explain clever graphical tricks, such as parallax scrolling in NES games.

> "I think it's fun to delve into each version of a classic game"
> John Linneman

How useful do you find emulation as a tool to find out what a game is doing technically?
It's proven quite useful in many cases. With certain emulators, it's possible to peek behind the curtain, so to speak. You can see things like what's being stored in VRAM, examine hardware utilisation, listen to individual sound channels, play in wireframe mode and even extract assets in real time. This type of information is very useful in better understanding the way a game works and how effectively it makes use of the hardware.

What sort of things would you like to include in future tests that haven't been possible so far?
The big thing for me must be arcade games. When covering arcade titles, such as *Daytona USA*, I've still had to rely on emulation but would much prefer having access to real arcade hardware instead. It would also be great to start examining classic Japanese and European computer hardware. I grew up with the IBM PC so I missed out on platforms such as the Amiga, Sharp X68000, PC-98 and FM Towns. There may be something in the works on that front if all goes according to plan!

If you had to pick a top three, which games do you feel represent the perfect balance between good game design and technical excellence?
That's a difficult question! *SoulCalibur* for Dreamcast – with its richly detailed fighters, beautiful arenas and fluid animation it stands the test of time like no other Dreamcast game from that era. It also remains one of the most enjoyable and polished 3D fighting games ever made. That Namco could achieve this so early in the life of the system is astounding.

Yoshi's Island for the SNES – perhaps the single most impressive piece of software for the platform. The dev team used the SuperFX2 chip to great effect enabling visual tricks that seem almost impossible for the SNES. It's also backed by world-class Nintendo gameplay and a memorable soundtrack. I don't think you'll find a better balance of tech and gameplay on the system.

Shinobi 3: Return of the Ninja Master – this may seem like a strange choice but I feel that it embodies everything great about the Mega Drive experience. With huge detailed sprites, loads of parallax backgrounds, an incredible soundtrack, great special effects and perfectly refined gameplay, it's a true masterpiece. *





» Here's a simple side-by-side comparison of *Virtua Fighter* on 32X and Saturn, showing relative graphical quality.



THE POWER STICK
"Together with a boxed copy of the Joyboard, Amiga started with peripherals, rather than computers."
PAID: €20

RINGS OF MEDUSA
"Took me months to complete this game. It had everything you need: trade, exploration, battles and story."
PAID: €20

EMPIRE
"The mother of all strategy games and the best wargame on the Amiga. Three friends, countless nights."
PAID: €40

NUCLEAR WAR
"'War has never been so much fun' does not only count to *Cannon Fodder*. *Nuclear War* was very funny, with hilarious special weapons such as the cow missile. A game was very short, so you could play it every now and then."
PAID: €60

JEANNE D'ARC
"An epic underated game with background story of Joan Of Arc. Good balance between strategy and action."
PAID: €20

BIO

NAME: Oliver Knagge

ESTIMATED VALUE:
A nice residential bungalow

FAVOURITE SYSTEM:
Amiga 500

FAVOURITE GAME:
Battle Isle

Amiga Power

Readers take us through the retro keyhole

We've featured Amiga collectors in the mag before, but we've never shown off a collection that's on the same scale as Oliver Knagge's epic haul. He's been collecting for the machine ever since he received his first Amiga as a youngster, and he still has his original system and games from that period. "It's *the* system from my childhood," he smiles.

While many collectors are quite happy to own the games they loved as a child, Oliver typically goes one step further and is always on the lookout for different versions or variations of his favourite games. "I usually collect box variations if they are different at all," he explains to us. "Most US releases are different in box size and cover artwork, so I usually own non-EU releases of all games in my collection. In some cases I also go for the AGA editions or CD32 versions where the game is different, eg with a FMV intro. I also own German editions and in some cases Italian or Spanish releases if the box is different.

"I'm not going after low-budget releases or compilations. Maybe these are getting rare while no true collector wants them."

Unlike some of his collecting peers, who strive to attain an entire collection of a specific system, Oliver knows that this is something he's never likely to achieve chasing Amiga games, and interestingly, it's not necessarily money that is the contributing factor. "I would say 80 per cent of all games are very common, you can even get a *Giana Sisters* three to five times a year on eBay/marketplaces," he continues. "Rarity is *not* necessarily an indication of value. Some common games show up as rare because collectors don't want them, while some scarce games are grabbed by collectors every time they show up. The earlier releases from before 1988 and the last releases from 1993 onward are hard to come by due to their low production numbers. And what's complete? All games? All unique Amiga games? All box variations and non-EU releases? Shareware games? You have to decide."

One good thing about collecting for the Amiga is that it doesn't suffer from the expense factor that's a considerable hurdle for those wanting to chase console games, with Oliver confirming to us that many games still sell well below their original retail prices. "It always depends how many people are getting into the hobby and [decide to] hunt down the must-haves," he confirms. "You can grab rare games for cheap as chips, but the usual suspects always get their amount. The common Amiga games cost between €5 to €40 with only a few going beyond €100.

So what should you do if you wish to amass a collection similar to Oliver's? The key thing appears to be sensible with your purchases. "Set yourself a limit in space and amount you want to pay," he says. "Most people start with the games they owned or played in childhood. That's basically up to 300 games. You can grab these within months on auction sites – but hunting them down in forums, marketplaces, trade fairs for reasonable prices is the real fun. And fun should be the most part when it comes to a hobby like collecting games." *

JEWEL IN THE CROWN

KAISER - GERMAN BOARD GAME COLLECTOR'S EDITION

■ "We played this game a lot with my friends after school. Building your own kingdom, seizing friends' countries and allocating taxes and corn was a lot of fun. With the board game edition you can keep track of your little kingdom offline."

PAID: €21




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BACK TO THE NOUGHTIES

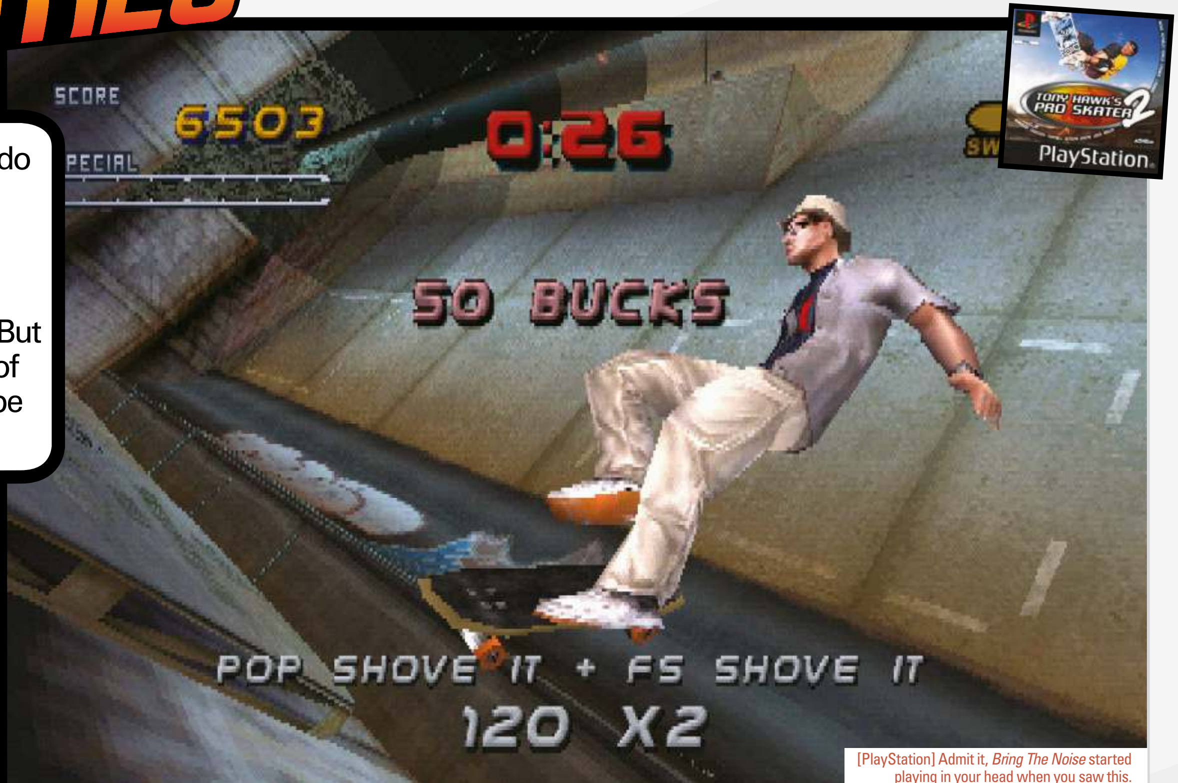
OCTOBER 2000 – Nintendo hits a purple patch, Sony delays the PS2, Sega unleashes the hardest driving game ever, and Turok returns to the N64. But what did the press make of it all? Join Nick Thorpe to find out...



NEWS OCTOBER 2000

On 7 October, Slobodan Milošević resigned his post as president of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, following a disputed election. The government claimed that opposition leader Vojislav Koštunica had won slightly less than an absolute majority, necessitating a run-off against Milošević. However, protests broke out as discrepancies in the results came to light. With the army prepared to allow for the violent overthrow of the government, Milošević was forced out of office. Within days, election results showing a majority for Koštunica were released, and Milošević was arrested and extradited to The Hague to stand trial for crimes against humanity during the Yugoslav Wars of the Nineties. He died of a heart attack in 2006, prior to any verdict.

On 17 October, a Leeds-bound train derailed at Hatfield, killing four passengers and injuring over 70 others. The incident, along with the fatal crash at Ladbroke Grove in 1999, forced the issue of rail safety into question. Investigations discovered insufficient staff skills at the maintenance contractors employed by rail network owner Railtrack, which had purchased the rail network upon its privatisation in 1994. The cost involved caused Railtrack to falter in 2002, and the network was returned to the public sector under Network Rail.

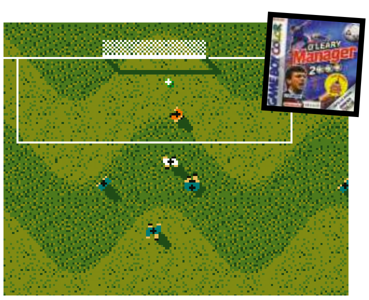


[PlayStation] Admit it, *Bring The Noise* started playing in your head when you saw this.

THE LATEST NEWS FROM OCTOBER 2000

After months of speculation and excitement, Nintendo revealed its next-generation consoles for the first time at its Spaceworld show in Japan. The big news was the unveiling of Project Dolphin as the GameCube – a boxy purple unit which, bizarrely, included its own carrying handle. Like the N64, it included four controller ports, but unlike the N64 it included two memory card ports and a drive for 8cm DVD-based optical discs. Few games were confirmed, but demo footage showed off a realistic-looking Link fighting Ganon, a new *Metroid* game, Luigi being terrorised by ghosts, and, of course, a gaggle of *Pokémon*. The system would be ready for a July launch in Japan, with a UK launch date and price to be confirmed.

The Game Boy Advance had already been announced, but Nintendo finally showed off the hardware itself. The 32-bit, full-colour handheld adopted a widescreen display and a new horizontal layout, with controls to the sides of the screen as opposed to below, and added two shoulder buttons. Games confirmed included *Mario Kart Advance*, the odd puzzle game *Kuru Kuru Kururin*, an RPG called *Golden Sun* and a real-time strategy game called *Napoleon*. Better yet, full backwards compatibility with existing Game Boy and Game Boy Color games was confirmed. Tantalisingly, images of the new handheld connected to the GameCube were also shown, with Nintendo confirming the possibility that the machine could be used as a controller in some GameCube games.



[Game Boy Color] *O'Leary Manager 2000* is great both on the pitch and in the dugout.

In other next-gen news, the PS2 suffered another release date slip – this time to 24 November 2000, four weeks later than originally planned. Sony spokesman Chris Deering explained the delay, telling *Arcade* that "PlayStation 2's performance continues to exceed even the most optimistic forecasts in Japan." Despite this setback and a controversial preorder system, Deering claimed that Sony would be, "Shipping many times more PlayStation 2 units than when PlayStation was released in September 1995." In brighter news, the press was finally starting to become enthusiastic about future PS2 software. *Arcade*'s cover story was a preview feature on *TimeSplitters*, a PS2-exclusive first-person shooter by some of the core members of the *GoldenEye* team. Meanwhile, EA's *SSX* was "one of those jaw-dropping experiences we were all promised with PlayStation 2", according to *CVG*. *Arcade* was also excited, citing it as "the first PS2 game to feel like a next-generation game" – a massive turnaround from when the magazine described it as a "laughing stock" six months prior.

It's not every month that a sequel to an extreme sports game is the biggest release of the month, but few extreme sports sequels have ever been quite as brilliant as *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 2*. The original had been a surprise hit in 1999, and the follow-up delivered a greater variety of objectives, better level



[Dreamcast] *F355 Challenge* is the Grace Jones of racing games – beautiful but incredibly intimidating.



[N64] *Turok 3* can't quite keep pace with *Perfect Dark*, but game-starved N64 owners didn't mind.

design and the new 'manual' trick which allowed you to extend combos over flat ground. Reviewers resembled your local shopping centre skaters, in that they were falling over themselves to praise it. "Every single aspect of the original has been refined and honed to perfection," enthused *CVG*'s Maura Sutton in a 5/5 review, before asserting that, "Players unfamiliar with skating games will be sucked in and have their lives ruled by the lure of the tiny wheeled demagogue." Pete Wilton of the *Official PlayStation Magazine* was similarly impressed, awarding the game 9/10 and describing it as, "Not so much a game as a way of losing entire weekends."

As the year was coming to a close, other big hitters also started to appear in October. The PlayStation FPS *Alien Resurrection* bagged 4/5 reviews from both *CVG* and *Arcade*, with the former declaring that, "You'll never be able to relax in this game, such is the power of the alien AI." Olympic Games tie-in *Sydney 2000* picked up 7/10 from *Official PlayStation Magazine*, 3/5 from Arcade and 4/5 from *CVG*. Sega's Dreamcast effort *Virtua Athlete 2K* had to settle for silver, with 2/5 from *Arcade* and 4/5 from *CVG*. Also on the Dreamcast was *Ferrari F355 Challenge*, a game which *Arcade* praised for its "sparkling visuals and near-perfect physics", and noted as being "the most challenging driving game to date" in a 4/5 review. *Edge* believed it to be "easily the best Dreamcast driving game to date", an accolade worth a surprisingly miserly 7/10. N64 owners got to enjoy *Turok 3: Shadow Of Oblivion*, 4/5 from *CVG* and 82% from *N64 Magazine*, the latter describing it as, "A real mixed bag of gut-tightening brilliance and abject tedium." *PC Zone*'s cover story was the big new release of the month, *Star Trek Voyager: Elite Force*, which it gave 84% and described as, "Probably the best single-player first-person shooter since *Half-Life*."

But the big surprise of the month was reserved for Game Boy Color owners, who got the rather brilliant football game *O'Leary Manager 2000*. The game fused brilliant top-down football gameplay with comprehensive management simulation, and earned 5/5 from both *CVG* and *N64 Magazine*. Would their fortunes continue? There's only one way to find out – come back next month. *

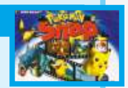


[PS2] *SSX* had improved massively since it was shown off at events earlier in the year.

CHARTS

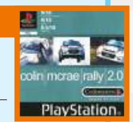
OCTOBER 2000

NINTENDO 64



1 Pokémon Snap (Nintendo)
2 Perfect Dark (Nintendo)
3 Pokémon Stadium (Nintendo)
4 The Legend Of Zelda: Ocarina Of Time (Nintendo)
5 Rayman 2 (Ubisoft)

PLAYSTATION



1 Colin McRae Rally 2.0 (Codemasters)
2 WWF Smackdown (THQ)
3 World Championship Snooker (Codemasters)
4 Vagrant Story (Square)
5 Hogs Of War (Infogrames)

PC



1 Grand Prix 3 (Hasbro)
2 The Sims (EA)
3 Icewind Dale (Interplay)
4 Diablo II (Havas)
5 Shogun: Total War (EA)

MUSIC



1 Holler/Let Love Lead The Way (Spice Girls)
2 I'm Over You (Martine McCutcheon)
3 She Bangs (Ricky Martin)
4 Who Let The Dogs Out? (Baha Men)
5 Stomp (Steps)

THIS MONTH IN…



Computer & Video Games

A reader identified only as Lucifer (from Hell, obviously) was more than annoyed by *CVG*'s treatment of one *Sonic The Hedgehog*, enquiring "How, pray tell, in a proper fight, could that stupid yellow prick Pikachu ever beat The Spiny One?" We wonder whether poor Lucifer ever found the help he clearly needed.



PC Zone

"It seems that the official *PC Zone* drink, the 'Wheato', is now a thing of the past," wrote Martin Korda, explaining how multiplayer shooter *Counter-Strike* had taken over the office. Apparently, after one game section editor Mark Hill was "threatening to kill Tim with a copy of *Test Drive 6*". Steady on, Mark – let him die with dignity!

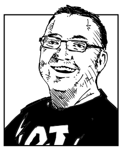


Arcade

"*Arcade* is changing. Find out how on 01/11/2000," said the magazine. But to say it was changing was putting it lightly, as our shelves would never see *Arcade* again. Editor Tim Weaver was put in charge of a largely new team to create *Video Gamer*, a 99p monthly gaming magazine that ultimately lasted a mere four months.

Prohibition

DON'T BRING A JOYSTICK TO A MOUSE FIGHT



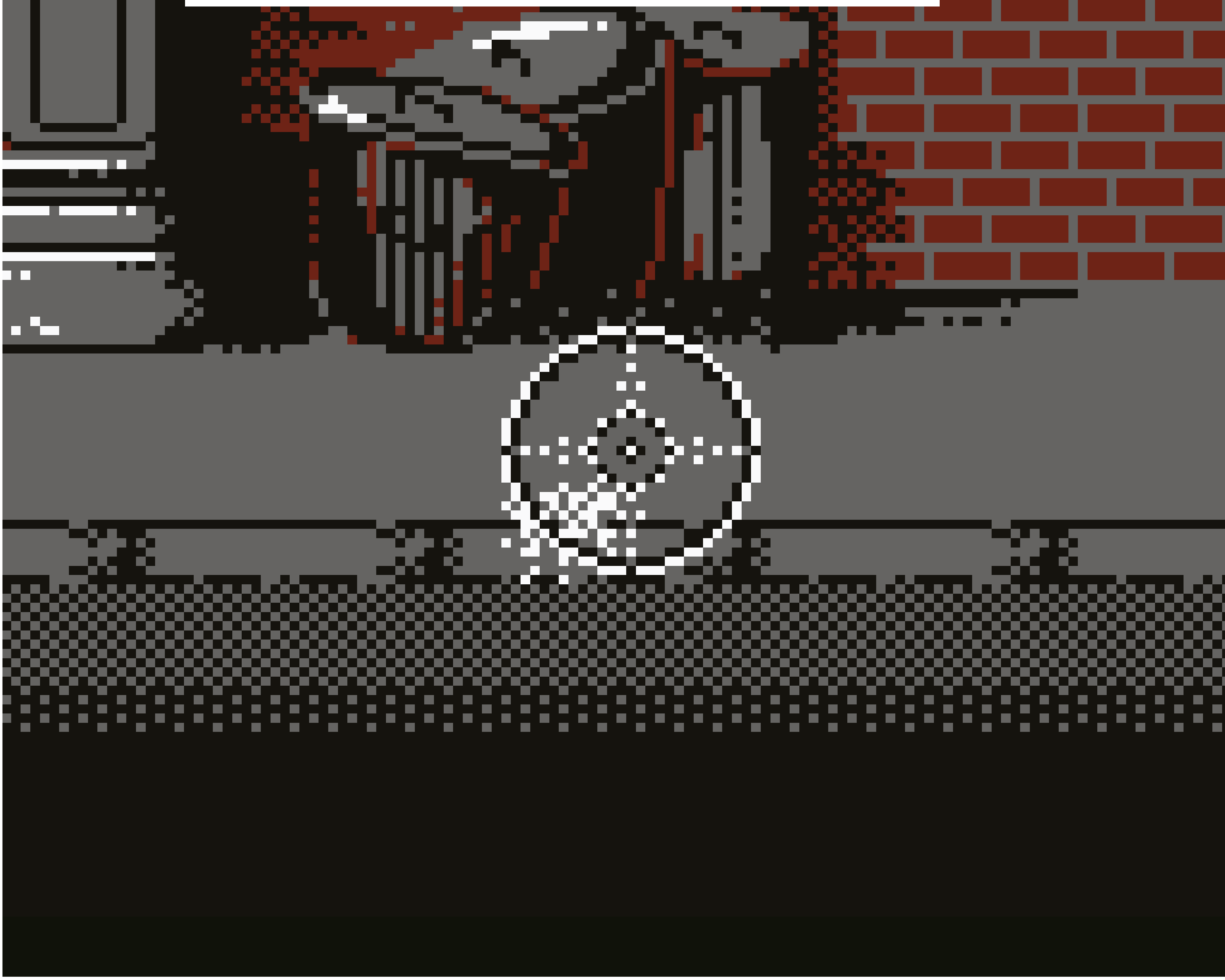
» AMSTRAD CPC » INFOGRAMES » 1987

I was a huge fan of Brian De Palma's *The Untouchables* as a kid. Filled with killer lines and some sensational set-pieces – the steps sequence remains a wonderful piece of cinematography – it made a huge impact on me as a young teenager and I watched it repeatedly once it was available to buy on VHS. Sadly, the actual game didn't really catch my imagination in the same way, meaning I went to *Prohibition* for all my Eliot Ness-related thrills.

Infogrames' game certainly can't match Ocean's offering when it comes to sheer variety, but if all you want is hardcore, fast-paced shooting, it's pretty much unbeatable. All you're really doing is scanning a street and looking for bad guys. When you see one you plug them with bullets from your Tommy Gun and then look for the next bad guy to take out. And that's pretty much it. What elevates *Prohibition*, though, is that you get so little time to hunt down your quarry that you begin to panic as every precious second goes by and you still haven't locked onto your target.

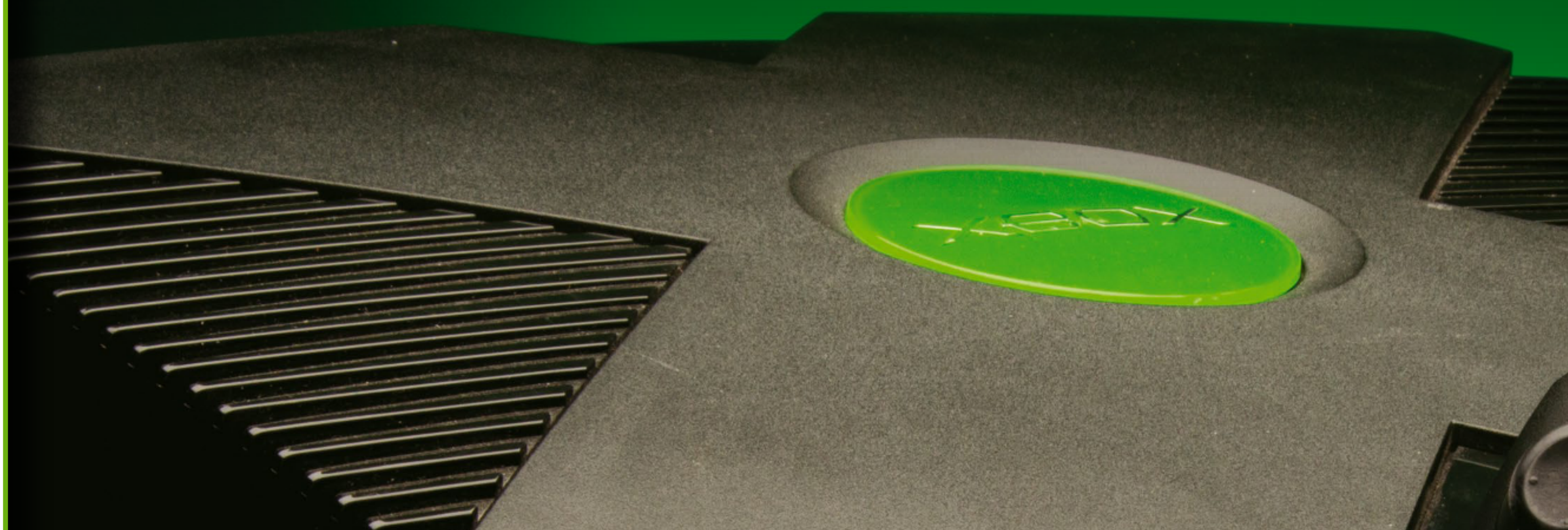
The extremely stingy time frame will be too tight for some and ruin any enjoyment that comes from playing *Prohibition*, but if you can live with it you'll discover that the game offers plenty of tense shooting as you scour the alleyways and gantries looking for rogue gangsters to take out. The distinct stylistic look has its detractors as well, although I think it's a boon, allowing for some really detailed looking adversaries. Granted, they can sometimes get lost on the backgrounds, but that was also an issue on the other 8-bit versions of the game. For me, having to frantically seek those sneaky hidden gangsters out just adds to the fun.

While I'm on the subject of the other versions, it's worth noting that I was always jealous of Atari ST owners, as they not only had access to a far better looking version of the game, but also had mouse access, which I'd imagine would have made the game far more easier to play. One day I'll actually fire up an emulator and find out. *




3

INSIDE THE XB



MICROSOFT MAESTROS

The developers who dared to think outside the box



SEAMUS BLACKLEY
Xbox CTO



ED FRIES
VP of Games Publishing, Microsoft Game Studios

OX

MICROSOFT IS ONE OF THE TITANS OF TODAY'S CONSOLE GAMING WORLD, BUT IT WASN'T ALWAYS THIS WAY. NICK THORPE SPEAKS TO THE MEN BEHIND THE MACHINE AND ITS GAMES TO FIND OUT HOW THE WINDOWS COMPANY INVADED THE LIVING ROOM...



"The idea of Microsoft making a games console in 1999 was fucking ludicrous!" Seamus Blackley's recollection isn't wrong, but such a notion seems like ancient history today. Microsoft is now established in the console gaming industry, with a tenure that is soon to match the likes of Sega and Atari's hardware ventures, so it's easy to forget a time when journalists openly questioned how such a "terminally uncool" company could make a successful incursion into an entertainment business. But the Xbox did succeed thanks to a band of committed gamers, a forward-thinking approach to development and a boatload of cash – and there's never been a better time to get into the console than today, thanks to its cheap games.

The Xbox story begins with Seamus Blackley, who in the late Nineties was at Microsoft and in charge of entertainment graphics on Windows – essentially, getting multimedia and gaming applications working nicely. "Sony announces the PlayStation 2, and they say it's going to replace the PC," recalls the industry veteran. "I had the roadmaps of all the graphics card manufacturers – 3DFX, Nvidia, ATI. I was visiting my girlfriend who was at that point living in Boston, flying there, and I realised that the roadmap for graphics from the guys making cards for the PC was going to far exceed the performance of what PlayStation

was going to do." The only problem for Seamus was the PC platform itself. "I'd been making PC games at that point for many years. You have to pander to the lowest common denominator, so you can never make a game that actually uses the full performance of any of these things, whereas on console you can because obviously you've got a single hardware target."

The appeal of a single platform was somewhat rooted in Seamus' recent development history. "I had nothing to lose but I was also passionate, because I had this titanic and horrible failure with the game *Trespasser*," notes Seamus. The *Jurassic Park* tie-in was ambitious – its environments, physics engine and rendering techniques were far beyond what most games had to offer in 1998, but it was shoved out of the door early and required a monstrously powerful PC to run acceptably. Together with fellow DirectX engineers Kevin Bachus, Ted Hase and Otto Berkes, Seamus drew up a plan for a "DirectX Box" console. "Our entire goal was to make a box for developers, because we were all developers," Seamus explains.



» [Xbox] Instead of porting PC properties, existing Microsoft developers like FASA Studio worked on new games, like *Crimson Skies*.

> **"When it was looking bad, people called it 'Coffin Box' – Your career's in the coffin if you work on that!"**
> Seamus Blackley

Rather than using the custom components of its competitors, the team chose to employ largely off-the-shelf PC parts in the hardware design. "At that time, everybody made games on the PC. All the PlayStation games – even Nintendo, the PC was the development platform. They would have a target, and then they would compile it for this other platform, because the PC had all the tools," explains Seamus, explaining the philosophy behind this choice. "So the basic, simple thought is why don't we just have the target platform also employ that architecture? Then it's super trivial and nothing gets in your way. If we can do that, then we should have a huge advantage in making better content, and in a content business that's the win."

To get that content, the DirectX team would have to work with Microsoft's established gaming division. "I'm someone who loves games, and I had left the Office side of the company to run Microsoft's game business because of that," remembers Ed Fries, former vice president of game publishing at Microsoft. "I had worked for about four years to grow Microsoft's game business on the PC and we had done well there, so we were just starting to think about how we could grow more and faster. That involved thinking about getting into the console world, where we hadn't really done anything yet. So that was what was in my head when the guys from the DirectX team first walked into my office and proposed the original Xbox." Ed would soon find himself as part of that team, managing Microsoft's internal Xbox software development efforts, and after launch he became responsible for third-party relations, too.

Selling the Xbox vision was easier said than done, in part because the Xbox as a consumer entertainment device didn't fit the company culture of selling business software. "One of the huge problems we had was that we were at the Windows company," Seamus explains. "We said, 'Hey, we want to make this games console,' and every Microsoft guy who had been steeped in operating systems said, 'Oh yes, Windows for the living room – it'll run Windows and we can upgrade it,' and we would freak out and say, 'No, it's fixed, that's not how this business works.' We had to explain to them that the console business was a business in which you sold content, and made money from the content, not from the operating system." Seamus and the Xbox team would have to fight an uphill battle against corporate caution, and soon learned that the best way to fight it was to make out that there was no battle at all. "There were a lot of people who said it should be Windows for the living room, and we surfed on that – we let people believe that because it helped us. Members of our tiny little rogue tribe, we understood that the end result was going to have to be no operating system."

While an internal political battle is no surprise, what comes as a shock is that despite being aware of the company's power and resources, the games industry was also sceptical of Microsoft's chances





» Seamus Blackley credits Bill Gates, seen here unveiling the Xbox, as being a key internal supporter of the console.



» [Xbox] *Halo 2* generated an enormous $125 million in sales on launch day.

in the console market. "For the first six months, Xbox was me and Kevin going around and giving a presentation for developers," recalls Seamus. "We had a meeting with the president of one of the big Japanese game companies. He proceeded to tell me that Xbox was going to fail, that no American console could succeed, and that I was going to be unable to get Microsoft to do it, and that nobody was going to believe that Microsoft would carry through." That wasn't the only hostile response Seamus endured, as another incident at a large publisher's Canadian studio illustrates. "The guys who ran that office took me aside and told me I couldn't speak there because they didn't believe Microsoft would do a console, and that I could pull it off. The whole audience was waiting for 40 minutes while they grilled me."

Right up until the green light was given, other people wanted to have their say, and the Xbox team found itself fending off attempts to turn the project into Web TV, a tablet and other such things that were closer to Microsoft's comfort zone – as well as attempts to kill it stone dead. "When it was looking bad, people called it 'Coffin Box'," remembers Seamus. "Your career's in the coffin if you work on that! People would say this to me and I'd say 'No, it's going to succeed' and then I'd drive home crying."

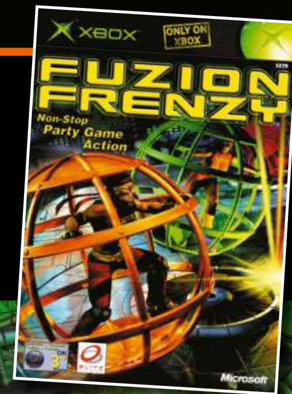
What ultimately kept the project from failing was the support of the company's old guard, from the early Windows days. "A few people who were around from that era, and remembered what it was like, were reminded of it by what we were



» [Xbox] Rare utilised the power of Xbox to make Conker look fluffier than ever before.

Q&A: PHILIP OLIVER & ANDREW OLIVER

The men in charge of Blitz Games look back at the creation of the first published Xbox game





» [Xbox] Designed as the Xbox's answer to party games like *Mario Party*, *Fuzion Frenzy* sold enough to warrant a sequel.

How did you get the job of producing *Fuzion Frenzy* for Microsoft?

Philip: When Microsoft decided to enter the console market they sensibly decided to contact many major developers around the world. Blitz Games was growing fast and gaining a great reputation for mass market, fun character-based games. They wanted to launch with a variety of first-party games that appealed to different player types and one of the slots they were trying to fill was a party game. This fitted our profile well and we were invited to pitch.

What were the advantages and disadvantages of the Xbox hardware compared to the competition?

Andrew: It really was a standardised PC in box. This meant it was extremely familiar and easy to develop for, especially for any developers that came from PC development. In fact, Microsoft told developers to just get on and write the games, ASAP, with high spec PCs and console-style controllers.

How long did development of *Fuzion Frenzy* take?

Philip: We learnt Microsoft was planning a console in summer 2000 and pitched Blitz Party in the Autumn. November and December saw us getting the team together and getting the project underway. To win the contract, not only did it need to be a great compelling game, we had to agree to have the game mastered by the end of August 2001. Microsoft assured us things would move fast from their side and so we immediately put developers on making minigames, as we only had ten months of development time.

How did you come up with the minigames found in *Fuzion Frenzy*?

Andrew: We had a team of about 35 people on the game and split them into three subteams. Within these subteams we paired artists with programmers and each had to create a prototype game a week for the first two months. Then, working with our Microsoft Producer, Gordon Hee, we picked the ones that were working best and dropped those that looked problematic or just weren't fun. The next phase was to work up the chosen prototypes to more polished games, with depth, AI and fitting the chosen art style. It was massive parallel development and it worked really well and resulted in 45 minigames and the metagame. *Fuzion Frenzy* was completed on schedule and was the first mastered game for Xbox, in fact it appeared on shop shelves a week ahead of the Xbox itself!



» [Xbox] *Fuzion Frenzy* will be backwards compatible on the Xbox One when the Xbox One X launches on 7 November.

What audience was the setting and cast of *Fuzion Frenzy* designed to appeal to?

Philip: We wanted to ensure there was a consistent style running through all the games, even though they were all very different in gameplay. So, whilst designers and programmers were prototyping fun minigames, the art team were working on characters and art styles that would bind everything together coherently. They took inspiration from the skaters and boarders scene and then we decided to give it a strong futuristic sport arena look, taking inspiration from films like *Blade Runner* and *The Running Man*. We worked with JD Alley, the Microsoft Art Consultant to finalise the style.

How did you feel about *Fuzion Frenzy*'s sales and critical reception?

Andrew: I think the reception and sales, around half a million copies for the opening selling quarter, were all pretty reasonable and justified. Obviously, we'd hoped for more, but the small install base, and cost of additional controllers limited its potential. The development team continued development with *Fuzion Frenzy 2* with online play, as we knew that in the new year Microsoft would be launching the Live service and *Fuzion Frenzy* would make an obvious launch title for the service. Sadly, slow sales on the original boxed version meant they halted development of this version.

Later, sales continued to rise and over a million copies were sold. We were in constant contact with our producer and we convinced them it was worth making a sequel. However, due to internal politics at Microsoft, whilst they agreed to a sequel, they put the game out to tender and we had to bid competitively to win the rights to develop it. Hudson Soft was chosen as the developer of the sequel and they used a lot of our concepts.

We are extremely proud of *Fuzion Frenzy* and the team that built it. Those ten months were a pretty intensive time for all involved, but it was fun to develop and we so pleased that so many people found it fun to play and still fondly remember it.



BARGAIN HUNT

IF YOU WANT TO GET YOUR XBOX COLLECTION OFF TO A FLYING START, CHECK THESE OUT...

AMPED.......................... £0.50

■ This is an enjoyable snowboarding game, featuring free-roaming action that wouldn't become commonplace until later in the decade.

CHRONICLES OF RIDDICK: ESCAPE FROM BUTCHER BAY...... £1.00

■ This first-person adventure is a fantastic prison break tale, which allows you to both attack from the shadows and enjoy brutal brawls.

DEAD OR ALIVE 3....... £0.50

■ This fast-paced fighting game boasts phenomenal graphics and multi-tiered arenas to smash your opponents through.

FABLE: THE LOST CHAPTERS.................. £0.50

■ This Classics version of the ambitious Lionhead RPG has even more content than the original, with extra areas, quests and more.

HALO: COMBAT EVOLVED.. £0.50

■ The FPS which almost single-handedly propelled the Xbox to success is an essential purchase for this crazy price.

HALO 2..................... £0.50

■ It's the bestselling Xbox game ever! For this price, you might as well buy four copies and get a good old fashioned LAN party going.

NINJA GAIDEN........... £1.00

■ It's tough, but this 3D revival of Tecmo's classic franchise is a fast, stylish and very violent hack-and-slash adventure. Heads *will* roll.

PROJECT GOTHAM RACING 2.................. £0.50

■ Bizarre Creations' sequel occupies the middle ground between arcade excitement and hardcore simulation.

TOM CLANCY'S SPLINTER CELL £0.50

■ This stealth classic is at its best on Microsoft's console, thanks to longer levels and a tougher challenge all-round.

TOP SPIN TENNIS........ £0.50

■ This doesn't let you give Tim Henman the Wimbledon victory he craved, but that's about all this excellent tennis game doesn't do.

TOTAL.......... £6.00



» [Xbox] *Knights Of The Old Republic* was a big exclusive draw for *Star Wars* fans and RPG fans alike.

doing with Xbox and helped us out," Seamus recalls. "Chief amongst them was Bill Gates, but also Rick Rashid who ran Microsoft Research and Rick Thompson who ran the hardware group, and many, many others who loved the spirit of the thing, and backed us up politically in ways that I didn't even understand that we needed."

After getting the green light, Ed had less than two years to put together a launch line-up. As well as commissioning games from respected external studios, Microsoft employed what Ed calls an "all hands on deck" approach to game development internally. The teams that had been responsible for the company's successes in PC gaming were involved, but for various reasons didn't bring the old properties across. "It didn't really make sense to take *Flight Simulator* over, but it was certainly considered at times," Ed recalls. "The guys at Ensemble Studios looked at *Age Of Empires* and had multiple Xbox prototypes that they were developing, but none of those ended up turning into something real. The FASA group had a lot of contributions, *Crimson Skies* is a well-loved original Xbox game, and that came out of a PC game that the group had developed a few years earlier." While not a conscious choice, this ultimately gave the Xbox an identity distinct from Microsoft's PC gaming heritage.

For all of the gaming expertise that already existed within Microsoft, the team that would ultimately make the biggest impact was a new acquisition, Bungie. The team had a good reputation from the *Marathon* and *Myth* games,



» [Xbox] *Ninja Gaiden* put the Xbox to great use, displaying a number of impressive graphical effects.

"As far as Bungie goes, I definitely bet everything on Halo… All was going to get was the team and Halo"
Ed Fries

but had hit financial trouble and was up for sale. "As far as Bungie goes, I definitely bet everything on *Halo*," says Ed. "I had to do a deal with [minority Bungie owners] Take-Two, and basically the way we put the deal together was they got the back catalogue, all the old work and brands from the past, and all I was going to get was the team and *Halo*." The promising first-person shooter had already been revealed for PC and Mac, but Microsoft decided it'd be a great Xbox exclusive.

Did I know then that *Halo* would be the killer app? In a lot of ways, we didn't really know what we were doing," confesses Ed. "We had never done a game in the console world before. We were getting a lot of mixed feedback – a lot of people looked at *Halo* and thought it looked like a PC game, they thought it wasn't colourful enough, the characters weren't cartoony enough. There was a nagging feeling that because we had come from a PC heritage, that this was the game that appealed to us, but it wouldn't to the regular console audience." Knowing that the office favourite might not be universally appealing, the team made sure to back a safer bet too. "At the same time we were working with Lorne Lanning, who is a super talented guy with his *Oddworld* franchise which had been proven successful on the PlayStation," Ed explains. "That was another game we were excited about, so we launched both games with a pretty similar amount of marketing support."

What helped every team was that the system was easy to work with. This was the biggest goal for the system, and by all accounts the team delivered on this front. Chris Sutherland was at Rare as the company transitioned from GameCube to Xbox, and remembers the move being relatively painless. "As you'd expect with Microsoft, there was plenty of documentation so it wasn't too tough to move over," the programmer recalls. Former Bizarre Creations developer Stephen Cakebread was also impressed with the developer support, particularly when it came to tools. "They were a significant step up from the tools on other platforms, and eventually they even surpassed what was available on the PC," he explains. "Even though the Xbox had better raw performance numbers over the competition, I think the improved environment for devs is what made the most difference." It was a big win for the team, and one which Seamus considers to be a signature achievement for the platform. "Sony and Nintendo got away with treating their developers terribly," he says of the pre-Xbox years. "The thing that I'm most proud of, that I think everybody can be most proud of, was that Sony suddenly had to do developer support."

It also didn't hurt that as a piece of hardware, the Xbox was a beast. The system packed a 733MHz Intel Pentium III CPU, a custom Nvidia GeForce 3-based GPU, 64MB shared RAM and a DVD drive. The machine also included an 8GB hard disk – a first in console gaming. This was a big advantage, as former Bizarre Creations programmer Stephen Cakebread explains: "The HDD was faster than a DVD, so if you copied files from the DVD to the HDD you could load them much faster next time around, with the additional bonus that you could load from both the HDD and DVD at the same time! (eg, loading levels from one and streaming music from the other)." Overall, the Xbox had the specification of a decent PC of the time (which still would have cost twice as much as an Xbox on launch), but as the Xbox wasn't burdened with the task of running Windows and its developers didn't have to worry about supporting lesser systems, its gaming performance was astonishing.

When the press finally got their hands on the Xbox, reception was broadly positive though there were some reservations about the console's look, as well as the enormous joypad nicknamed the 'Duke' by players. "You should ignore



» Richard Branson sells the UK's first Xbox at the Virgin Megastore on Oxford Street.



Q&A: MARTYN CHUDLEY

The man in charge of the Project Gotham Racing series remembers the start of the series



What did the Xbox offer over the competition in terms of performance? What was it like to code on?

The Xbox was a dream to develop for. The PS2 was crazy powerful for the time, but you had to work so hard to get access to that power – with the Xbox, it was all abstracted, allowing our coders to get far more of the raw power with much less effort. We also had a stable development environment through Microsoft's pre-existing Windows development tools. We (Bizarre) also had direct access to the Microsoft guys and gals who were 100 per cent responsible for the hardware and software, so this support was amazing.

How did your exclusivity deal on *Project Gotham Racing* come about?

The deal for *PGR* came about as a result of Sarah (my other half) and Brian (Woodhouse – our Development Director) doing a pitch to Microsoft for an 'F1-style game in cities', as way of a follow up to *Metropolis Street Racer*. We 'knew' at that point that Dreamcast was effectively dead and that Sega would be going to become a multiplatform publisher, but they refused to acknowledge this to us. Ideally, we would have taken *MSR* to both PS2 and Xbox with Sega, but they just couldn't admit their situation to us in time for us to recoup some of our losses. Upon doing the 'F1-ish' pitch, the chaps at Microsoft saw a near-complete demo version of *MSR* and simply said, 'Why not give us *that*?'

Upon examining our contract with Sega it transpired that we (Bizarre) owned all the code and data, whereas Sega just owned the IP – essentially just the name *Metropolis Street Racer*. This meant that we could do a 'homage' game, using all of the cities and any new cars that Microsoft would license, just as long as we didn't call it *Metropolis Street Racer*!

Was there much stress getting the game ready for launch?

Oh yeah – it was mega stressful for the entire production. We basically had well under 12 months from start to finish. Our original plans for development started at the tail end of 2000, targeting console release of November 2001. This was a stupidly tight schedule given that we were doing a complete code rewrite, remodel of all the cars, had to hire new staff, working with a brand-new set of production people and to cap it all had multiple revisions of (usually underpowered) preproduction hardware and libraries to aim at.



» [Xbox] We're hoping that *PGR* will be announced as a supported title on the Xbox One's backward compatibility list.



» [Xbox] *Project Gotham Racing* was warmly received on its debut, netting 8/10 scores from *Edge*, *Game Informer* and Eurogamer.

How did you end up choosing the four city locations you went with?

The original locations (San Francisco, London and Tokyo) were chosen in conjunction with Sega as they were absolutely iconic, fit the key console territories and were all visually (and layout-wise) unique. New York was, again, chosen for its worldwide recognisability and also it was relatively easy for us to perform the research trips. In fact the cover art of the game was to feature the Ferrari F50 in front of the Twin Towers, but due to the catastrophic events of 9/11 we had long discussions with Microsoft about whether to keep (as a tribute) or remove the towers from the game (which we eventually did).

What improvements did *Project Gotham Racing* make over *Metropolis Street Racer*?

As far as I can remember, the biggest improvements over *MSR* included the addition of New York, and higher 'perceived value' cars – Ferrarri, TVR etc. Ultimately, the game was a complete rewrite from the Dreamcast code – everything, not just the engine. Physics, gameplay, UI, you name it. From a technical perspective Xbox gave us an order of magnitude more polygons (in the cars at least, the cities were just upscaled where it made most sense given our time pressures), shader effects (mainly reflections in both car rendering and circuit, and improved weather) and a doubling of the framerate to 60fps. I think we also made a conscious effort to make the game more 'mainstream' than what we perceived as a pretty hardcore *MSR* experience.

Why do you think Microsoft have never created a fifth game?

I'm guessing that basically Microsoft felt they could cover all bases with both the *Forza* and *Forza Horizon* brands – they didn't need a *PGR* hanging around in between, not quite a simulator, not quite an arcade experience. I think that if we had stayed with Microsoft (and not been acquired by Activision) then a *PGR5* could have happened, but alas it was not to be…

Finally, on a personal note I'd like to add that *PGR* couldn't have happened without our coder Edmund Clay, who sadly passed away in 2013. Edmund joined us to work on *PGR*, and I don't think there was an area of the game that he didn't touch – physics, rendering, AI, shaders - you name it, he was a massive influence.

> **"I think the improved environment for developers is what made the most difference"**
> Seamus Blackley

▶ the naysayers and doom merchants who have ignorantly dismissed Xbox out-of-hand," opined *Edge* after taking delivery of the finished product. "It's expensive, corpulent and the joypads aren't entirely ergonomic – but by the gods is it powerful." What's more, the software accompanying the machine delivered. In particular, *Halo* was hailed as "the most important launch game for any console, ever" by *Edge* and received the magazine's fourth 10/10 score. Other reviewers were similarly impressed, as evidenced by its score of 97 on review aggregator Metacritic.

The first territory to receive the system was North America, on 15 November 2001. Propelled by the popularity of Bungie's *Halo* and demand generated as a natural result of the holiday season, the Xbox sold an impressive 1.5 million units in the region before the end of the year. It was an encouraging start for a system that had faced so much scepticism, and North America would remain the console's stronghold for the duration of its lifetime – for every Xbox sold in the rest of the world, Microsoft sold two on its home continent.

However, things weren't nearly so rosy in Japan. Microsoft brought 250,000 consoles into the country for launch, and attracted some very high profile Japanese developers. Tecmo jumped in with both feet and provided some great exclusive





» People still love this alluring Xbox prototype – possibly because the production machine is no looker.



» [Xbox] Great Japanese games like *Panzer Dragoon Orta* failed to sell the Xbox to the Japanese public.

games, and Sega did the same while also building its Chihiro arcade platform around the console. However, others were more cautious. The likes of Capcom, Namco and Konami all jumped aboard, but didn't necessarily bring their big hitters with them – *Resident Evil* and *Tekken* didn't appear at all, for example. Companies like Square, Enix and Atlus stayed away completely. The Xbox never shed the perception that it was a product built by a foreign company for foreign audiences, and never gained a foothold in Japan as a result, selling a miserable 450,000 consoles over its entire lifetime.

Trading also proved difficult in Europe. The Xbox launched to great fanfare on 11 March 2002, but sales quickly dropped off and after just five weeks Microsoft announced that it would slash the price of the console by a third, cutting it from £299 to match the PlayStation 2's £199 price tag. The move understandably upset early adopters, who were offered two free games and an extra controller to make up for the unprecedented price drop, but it did serve to stabilise the system – during the week of the cut, Xbox sales were neck and neck with PS2 sales. The move also sparked a price war. Nintendo cut its GameCube price before even launching, and two subsequent price cuts brought the Xbox down to just £129 by April 2003. Cutting the price of the console by over 50 per cent in a little over a year did eventually convince European consumers to pick up the machine, but also ensured that Microsoft took heavy losses on every piece of hardware sold.



» [Xbox] The ease of porting from PC to Xbox ensured that the machine received versions of high-profile games, like *Doom 3*.

Microsoft also took other measures to ensure the success of the Xbox. A major one was the purchase of Rare, long considered to be one of Nintendo's key studios – a shock to players at the time, but something that had been brewing behind the scenes for some time. "I was equally shocked when they approached me and there was an opportunity to work with them," Ed reveals, surprisingly. "They had an interesting deal with Nintendo. Nintendo owned 50 per cent of Rare, and when they put that deal together, it was done well. They didn't want to sell half of their company and never be able to sell the other half. So they had a deal where [Nintendo] buys half, and then has the option to buy the other half within a number of years – and if you do not buy the other half, then [Rare] has the right to buy back your half at fair market value." The deal had already expired by 2000, but Nintendo paid for a two year extension and then declined to buy the company when the opportunity came around again.

Microsoft's $375 million purchase of Rare was made public on 24 September 2002, the day after Rare's only GameCube game was released. "I'd known there was a decision to be made between Activision and Microsoft," recalls Chris, who didn't perceive any shift in focus after the deal. "Rare wanted to carry on making the kinds of games it had been making and that would have been the wish of Microsoft too!" Ironically, though, Rare actually produced more games for Nintendo's Game Boy Advance than it did the Xbox during



» [Xbox] The *XSN Sports* range of games was key in the early years of the Xbox, before EA built Xbox Live support into its own sports games.

this time – only *Grabbed By The Ghoulies* and *Conker: Live & Reloaded* appeared on Microsoft's console, though it wasn't the only project Rare was working on. "*Kameo* was being built on the original Xbox, but it was brought over with a visual overhaul to the Xbox 360 as a launch title," explains Chris.

In November 2002 Microsoft launched its online gaming service, Xbox Live. The high-end service relied on broadband internet connections and required an annual subscription, but was far in advance of the decentralised online experience on PS2 and the near-total lack of online games on GameCube. Players enjoyed relatively lag-free and stable sessions, had a single username across all games, as well as systems for adding friends, sending messages and even voice chat. In

XBOX

November 2004, the service was extended to include downloadable game distribution via the new Xbox Live Arcade service, which allowed players to buy small, download-exclusive games such as *Bejeweled* and *Ms Pac-Man* for relatively low prices. As it arrived late in the life of the Xbox, this was a relatively short-lived service that hosted less than 30 games in total.

While players looking for online console gaming were undoubtedly best served by Microsoft, it's worth remembering that those customers were still a relatively small market – Xbox Live picked up a million subscribers by July 2004 and doubled that to 2 million by July 2005, but take-up of the service was never beyond ten per cent of the total Xbox user base at any given time. "I think Xbox Live truly took off with the 360," says Stephen, who points to the technical limitations of the era. "Having a wired internet connection to whatever room you had your gaming system setup in was a big ask for a lot of people, while Wi-Fi is ubiquitous now."



» [Xbox] *Dead Or Alive 3* looked absolutely astonishing in 2001, and holds up well today.

> **"If I had really known how powerful Sony and Nintendo were, I would have probably given up and there wouldn't be an Xbox"**
> Seamus Blackley

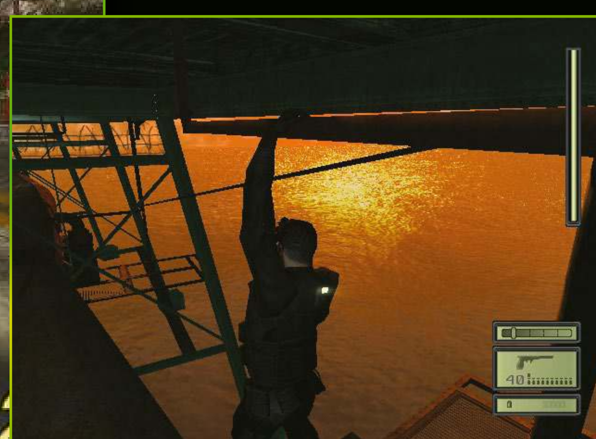
By 2004, the Xbox had gone from office punchline to legitimate knockout artist. The enormously popular *Grand Theft Auto* games made their way to the platform, as did Konami's *Pro Evolution Soccer*. EA launched its first Xbox Live compatible sports games, and in November, *Halo 2* became the biggest entertainment launch of all time. But despite its successes, the Xbox was not a tremendously long-lived console. On 12 May 2005, just three-and a-half years after the Xbox had initially gone on sale, Microsoft unveiled the next-generation Xbox 360 for release later that year. On the same day, Nvidia announced that Microsoft had ceased orders for the Xbox GPU and wouldn't be taking any more after 1 August – effectively shutting down production of the original console for good. Xbox owners would still enjoy a full slate of games into 2006 thanks to third party publishers, but releases dropped off following that year's holiday season, with just a handful of licensed games and annual sports updates arriving in 2007. The last Xbox game to be released was *Madden NFL 09*, in August 2008, and original Xbox Live shut down on 10 May 2010 (some weeks after its original 15 April termination date, thanks to some dedicated *Halo 2* players).

For all of Microsoft's clout as a company, and its considerable financial expenditure, the Xbox could only manage second place in its generation. "If I had really known how powerful Sony and Nintendo were, I would have probably given up and there wouldn't be an Xbox," admits Seamus. 24 million Xbox consoles were sold, scraping ahead of Nintendo's GameCube by just over 2 million units but falling massively short of the 155 million PlayStation 2 consoles that Sony sold. However, Microsoft gained many positive things from the original Xbox. It successfully established itself as a major player in the console market, building consumer recognition and developer relationships that would pay dividends for the Xbox 360. What's more, the Xbox allowed Microsoft to influence the wider console market, as the console shaped the future development of games consoles on a technical level. Every major console released since the Xbox has included some form of mass storage, built-in broadband internet support and support for downloadable software.

If you missed out on the system first time around, now is a great time to catch up as the Xbox is possibly the best value platform in retro gaming right now. Very few games are anywhere near their original price, and most are ridiculously cheap – even the very best on the platform. Original hardware isn't too hard to come by, and if you're stuck for that the Xbox 360 will run certain games (be sure to check before you buy). Microsoft has also announced plans for original Xbox backwards compatibility on the Xbox One.

Looking back at the impact of the Xbox, Chris feels it comes down to the skills transferred from Microsoft's other business. "This was really Microsoft's first sizeable foray into gaming




» [Xbox] Big new Western gaming franchises, such as *Splinter Cell*, got their big break on Xbox.



» In 2000, Raven and her giant robot buddy danced together to introduce the Xbox to the world.

entertainment; yes, they'd had *Flight Simulator* before and had built joysticks, but creating their own console was in many ways an unexpected move for a company that was more associated with operating systems and business software," he explains. "Their experience with working with developers on those more conventional products would have helped them build a system that would also be easy to develop for by game studios." But that's far from the only factor, as Stephen reminds us. "*Halo* defined the Xbox," the coder states. "There were plenty of other good games, but *Halo* was why you bought one in that first year after launch."

However, the last word must go to Seamus, for whom all of the political battles and the frustrated car journeys home were worthwhile because of the players themselves. "There are all of these times in my life when, wandering around, I meet somebody who tells me that Xbox stopped them from killing themselves during their divorce, or was the only reason they could survive as a kid in some horrible situation, or got them interested in studying science and now they have a PhD in chemistry. Every time that happens I choke up because I see a person in front of me whose life is better, and there's really nothing like that. That's what it's about." And he's right – the Xbox made an impact on the gaming industry and on Microsoft, but the real legacy of the Xbox lies in every *Halo* LAN party, your moral choices in *Fable*, and all those times you stayed up a little *too* late on Xbox Live. *

Special thanks to Seamus Blackley, Ed Fries and everyone else who contributed to this article.



» [Xbox] With games like *Project Gotham Racing 2*, the Xbox brought the dream of photorealism closer than ever before.

SPECS BOX

Take a look at how the guts of the Xbox compared to other machines of its era



DREAMCAST

RELEASED: 27 November 1998
CPU: 200MHz Hitachi SH-4
GPU: 100MHz VideoLogic PowerVR2
MEMORY: 16MB RAM, 8MB video RAM, 2MB audio RAM
MEDIA: 1.2GB GD-ROM
STORAGE: Up to two Visual Memory Units per connected controller (128KB each, optional)
NETWORKING: 56k dial-up modem (standard) / Broadband adapter with Ethernet port (optional)
CONTROLLER PORTS: 4



PLAYSTATION 2

RELEASED: 4 March 2000
CPU: 295MHz 'Emotion Engine'
GPU: 147.5MHz 'Graphics Synthesizer'
MEMORY: 32MB RAM, 4MB video RAM, 2MB audio RAM
MEDIA: 8.5GB DVD-ROM
STORAGE: Up to two memory cards (8MB each, optional), 40GB hard disk (optional)
NETWORKING: i.LINK port for local networking (standard on pre-2003 models), Network adapter with dial-up modem and Ethernet port (optional), Ethernet port (standard on slimline models)
CONTROLLER PORTS: 2



GAMECUBE

RELEASED: 14 September 2001
CPU: 485MHz IBM 'Gekko'
GPU: 162MHz ATI 'Flipper'
MEMORY: 24MB RAM, 3MB video RAM, 16MB audio/DVD cache
MEDIA: 1.5GB miniDVD-based 8cm disc
STORAGE: Up to two memory cards (512KB – 8MB each, optional)
NETWORKING: 56k dial-up modem (standard), Broadband adapter with Ethernet port (optional)
CONTROLLER PORTS: 4



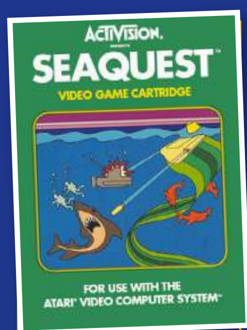
XBOX

RELEASED: 15 November 2001
CPU: 733MHz custom Intel Pentium III
GPU: 233MHz Nvidia NV2A
MEMORY: 64MB shared RAM
MEDIA: 8.5GB DVD-ROM
STORAGE: 8GB hard disk (standard), Up to two memory units per connected controller (8MB each, optional)
NETWORKING: Ethernet port (standard)
CONTROLLER PORTS: 4

THE MAKING OF SEAQ

Always a company that added its own ideas to popular games back in the early Eighties, Activision's aquatic take on Defender, Seaquest, is one such title. Kieren Hawken asks Steve Cartwright about his fishy tales

It's well documented how brilliant Activision's games for the Atari 2600 are. But for every *Pitfall!* and *Enduro* there are also far more underrated games, such as Steve Cartwright's *Seaquest,* that deserve your attention, too. While the inspirations for the game aren't immediately clear, Steve himself is very honest and forthright about this. "*Seaquest* was possibly the first game in history that was a reskin of an existing title, as I designed it as an evolution of the arcade game *Defender,*" he reveals. Using other peoples' games as an inspiration for something new was a tactic that Activision used a lot in its early years. You have titles such as *Beamrider* (*Juno First*), *Megamania* (*Astro Blaster*), *Robot Tank* (*Battlezone*) and *Starmaster* (*Star Raiders*) that had very clear origins, but with just enough original elements of their own to create a new game. Arcade games were, more often than not, the inspiration, so does Steve feel that this was something that the 2600 did particularly well? "Most definitely," he says. "In fact, most games of that era were fast-paced arcade games because of this." Maybe it was the 2600's particular suitability at doing games of this type, but *Seaquest* was only ever released for Atari's debut console in a time when Activision usually converted their games to several other formats after. That said, fond memories of the game from others did see it released for the Atari 8-bit, Android and even the Atari Jaguar in more recent years, albeit in an unofficial capacity.



IN THE KNOW

» **PUBLISHER:** ACTIVISION

» **DEVELOPER:** STEVE CARTWRIGHT

» **RELEASED:** 1983

» **PLATFORM:** ATARI 2600

» **GENRE:** SHOOT-'EM-UP

Although Steve was very clear about the origins of his game and, indeed, the inspirations are clear to see, when playing *Seaquest* it very much feels like its own game, rather than another generic arcade clone. In the game you control a small submarine which is trying to rescue stranded divers from shark infested waters. The idea is to simply rescue six of these stranded souls, the maximum your sub can hold, and then return to the surface. As if dealing with bloodthirsty sharks wasn't enough there are also enemy submarines that are offended by your presence and schools of fish that will do their best to get in your way. Thankfully, you can fire an endless stream of torpedoes in their direction to despatch them, but if you make contact with any of these oversized aquatic dwellers or get caught in enemy fire then you lose one of your three lives. Your other big concern is the limited amount of air in your submarine, you can make regular trips back to the surface to replenish this but this isn't always as easy as it sounds. On later levels enemy subs will also patrol the waves above, making these journeys more perilous. Once you return a full complement of divers to the surface, your mission starts all over again, only with more enemies that move even faster than before. If you managed to score 50,000 points or more and supply proof, then Activision would reward you with a prestigious Sub Club patch.

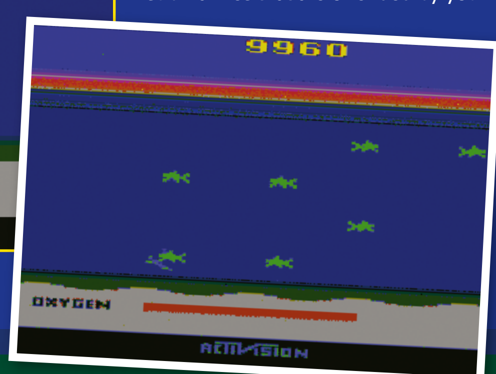
Seaquest isn't just great from a gameplay perspective, though, it's also impressive on a technical level, especially the number of on-screen objects its pushing around. Steve reveals his wizardry to us: "*Seaquest* utilises all the tricks that the 2600 hardware was capable



» [Atari 2600] The sharks in *Seaquest* comes in a variety of different colours to suit every home!



» [Atari 2600] Only one more diver is needed to finish the level, can you grab him before the pink flesh eaters do?



UEST



» [Atari 2600] On later levels enemy subs also patrol the waves above, making your mission much harder.

of. Your sub is player 'object 0' and enemy ships and sharks are both using player 'object 1', which is why you never see sharks and enemy subs on the same row at the same time. Additionally, multiple sharks and enemy subs were generated from the 2600 ability to display one, two or three copies of an object.

Your torpedo uses the missile object and the divers are made from the ball object, exhausting all other possibilities." We weren't just content with knowing the technical details, though, we were also keen to find out any other interesting stories regarding the creation of the game and Steve didn't disappoint "Well, as it turned out, there was an underwater salvage company called Seaquest Inc or something like that," he cautiously explains before going further. "They promptly sued Activision for stealing their name and for the concept for the game. I flew to Chicago for a deposition and their lawyers thought they had a slam-dunk case. Well, this was until I informed them that the game was a re-skin of an arcade game called *Defender*, that the name *Seaquest* was something I just dreamt up and that there was, in fact, no sunken ship or buried treasure in the game. That was just a story marketing invented for the back of the box to fuel the fantasy of the player! It's safe to say that it was quickly dismissed."

Seaquest has all the ingredients needed for an arcade-style shooter, so with this in mind we are curious to discover if Steve left anything out that he wanted to feature. "No, not really, I think I put in everything I intended for that game. The only thing that would have been nice was if the enemy subs were able to capture your divers." As well as *Seaquest*, Steve ended up creating a number of iconic games for Activision including *Megamania*, *Frostbite*, *Aliens*, *Hacker*, *Barnstorming* and *Plaque Attack*. After this, he had more success with the *Les Manley* series of adventure games at Accolade before heading up the *PGA Tour* franchise at EA. Even with the rest of his storied career on offer, *Seaquest* remains one of our favourites from his vast library.

Special thanks to Steve Cartwright for his time.

DEEP SUBMISSIONS

Looking for more subaquatic adventures? These try out the following nautical niceties

SILENT SERVICE



■ **Perhaps the most well-known submarine game out there is Microsoft's 1985 simulation of a US Navy vessel in the World War 2 battle of *Pearl Harbour*. Released for no less than 15 different formats, the game was created by the legendary Sid Meier of *Civilization* fame.**

THE HUNT FOR RED OCTOBER



■ The game of the Sean Connery film of the same name, which was itself based on a novel by Tom Clancy, *The Hunt For Red October* is set over five levels of arcade-style action. Although Grandslam's game is clearly submarine-based there are also non-aquatic sections too.

IN THE HUNT



■ Originally released in the arcades by Irem in 1993, *In The Hunt* is best known for its highly-sought-after PlayStation and Sega Saturn conversions. Although it's a pretty standard horizontally scrolling shoot-'em-up for the most part, the oceanic setting and visual style really sets the game apart.

TURBO SUB



■ And now for something a bit more outlandish! Based on an obscure arcade game of the same name, this Atari Lynx title from 1991 has more in common with Sega's classic *Space Harrier* than other games on this list. In *Turbo Sub*, you not only dive beneath the waves, but also get to fly above them!

COLLECTING SINC

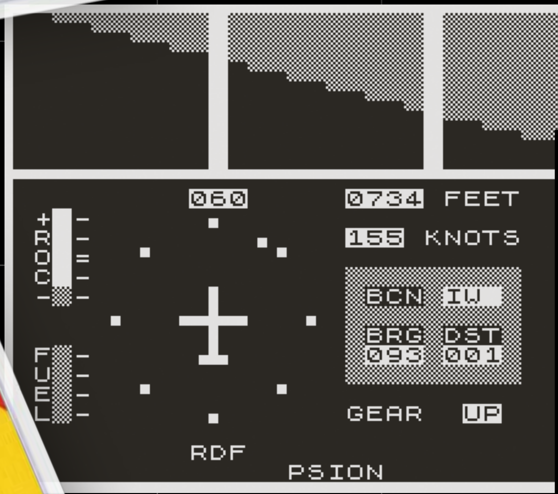
OUR LATEST COLLECTOR'S GUIDE FOCUSES ON THE SINCLAIR-BRANDED SOFTWARE FOR THE ZX81, SPECTRUM AND QL. MARTYN CARROLL SHEDS LIGHT ON THE BRAND AND REVEALS THE MOST EXPENSIVE TITLES



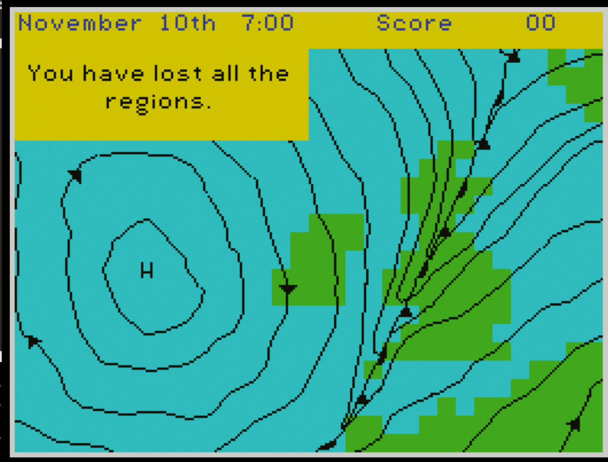
Sinclair Research was a computer manufacturer, placed firmly in the hardware business, but that didn't mean it was entirely ignorant of the software market. Sir Clive and his Cambridge team knew that computer owners wanted software and they'd happily spend money to buy it on prerecorded tapes. What the business didn't want, however, was the costs associated with an in-house development studio. The solution was to create its own software label, which it would use to publish titles from existing, and eager, third-party developers.

The label was launched in 1981, following the release of the ZX81 computer, and it carried an eclectic mix of entertainment, educational, business and hobbyist software. Some were original titles, others were rereleases, and all featured colour inlays sporting the familiar Sinclair logo. It was a professional-looking brand in the days when hand-drawn inlays were still common, and the Sinclair association no doubt established trust in buyers' minds. This is ironic now, as we know that many of the titles, particularly the early games, were pretty poor efforts that can't have been vetted too closely. Quality aside, the range has always attracted collectors due to the Sinclair name and the uniform branding.

Sinclair published 41 titles for the ZX81 and followed this up with 103 releases for its next computer, the Spectrum (which saw the introduction of the familiar 'Spectrum stripe' to the packaging). Some titles were released for both machines (such as Arctic's *Adventure* series and Psion's *Flight Simulation* and *Space Raiders* titles), and sometimes artwork from a ZX81 release would be reappropriated for a different Spectrum title. In 1984 the label was expanded to support the Sinclair QL and 23 titles (including several games) were released for the business machine. In total, 167 titles were published by Sinclair in the UK across the three formats (not



» [ZX81] *Flight Simulation* won't set you back too much. Basically, it's worth pocket change.



» [ZX Spectrum] This report is quite Michael Fish-esque.

lair



» [ZX Spectrum] *The Hobbit* is one of the easier games to obtain, you can grab it on eBay for around a fiver.

including titles that were only ever bundled with hardware, such as the free Horizons tape and the QL business suite).

To aid (and indeed entice) collectors, Sinclair established a simple alphanumerical code system that appeared on inlay spines. The letter denoted the type of software (G was for Game, B was for Business, E was for Education and so on), and then the releases were numbered sequentially. When the Spectrum range was launched, 'S' was added to the code to differentiate the titles. So for example, VU-Calc was B3, the third business title for the ZX81, and *Hungry Horace* was G13/S, the 13th game for the Spectrum.

Following the launch of the ZX Interface II in 1983, which added twin joystick ports and a cartridge slot, Sinclair released ten games on ROM cartridge. The titles were available on tape too so 'S' was replaced with 'R', thus the cart version of *Hungry Horace* was G13/R. As you might expect some printing errors crept in, such as both the tape and cart version of *Jetpac* sharing the code G27/R. There's also the well-known *Horace Goes Skiing* variant which has '*Hungry Horace*' misprinted on the inlay spine.

Sinclair made several changes to the range over time. The vast majority of ZX81 and early Spectrum titles came in single jewel cases, but later on larger cardboard packaging was used, mainly for non-gaming titles. On the Spectrum the cassette labels changed too, with the standard white labels being replaced with silver ones. When a new run of older titles was ▶



COLLECTOR Q&A

Jake Warren owns every title Sinclair released for the Spectrum



What inspired you to start collecting Sinclair titles?

I can remember the date that I got my Spectrum: 18 June 1983, from WHSmith in Bristol. With the computer I also bought a copy of *Flight Simulation*, so that was my first Sinclair title. Over the next few years I acquired several more. I used to love browsing the Sinclair product brochures, planning my next purchase. When I got back into all things Speccy years later, I was able to fill many of the gaps in my collection through eBay. I'm a bit of an OCD collector and things like numbering schemes and design uniformity are important – they need to look good lined up next to each other on a shelf! The Sinclair range satisfies that urge. Many titles have fantastic cover art too.

What do you think it is about the silver box titles that make them particularly sought-after?

The later titles, including the *MacMan* games, sold in very small numbers. The laws of supply and demand has meant that these rare titles always seem to fetch good prices. I'd be the first to admit that some of the titles aren't very good, but that doesn't matter when you are trying to complete a collection!

Which of your titles cost you the most to acquire?

The top three amounts I've paid are £129.45 for *MacMan In The Treasure Caves* in August 2010, £92.97 for *Oil Strike* in February 2013, and £78 for *MacMan's Magic Mirror* in March 2010.

Do you think prices have peaked?

Sinclair fans seem to be focusing on other publishers at the moment, such as Hit Squad and Codemasters, so I think prices have peaked or possibly even dropped a little at present. However, the rarest titles become available so infrequently that it only takes a couple of people to get in a bidding war and push prices sky high.

Rumours surround the Sinclair tape release of *Tranz Am*. Do you think it was ever published?

I remember reading a forum post from someone who claimed to have seen a *Tranz Am* tape but as far as I'm aware no one has definitely seen a copy. I personally don't think it was published, although it does seem strange as the other three Ultimate titles were. It would be great if a legitimate copy did surface and it could break records if it was sold. I live in hope.

Are there any other classic Spectrum ranges you collect?

I have a full collection of the Ultimate games, all of the single cassettes that Quicksilva produced, most DK'Tronics, Bug-Byte and Software Projects releases. I won a charity auction of all of Malcolm Evans' New Generation cassettes a few years ago. They were all signed by him so I'm particularly proud of those.





TOP TEN RARITIES

Deep pockets are compulsory if you want to acquire this little lot…



JETPAC

CODE: **G27/R**

■ Not the tape version, but the cartridge release, of course. None of the cart games sold very well, as they were also available on tape for around a third of the price, but now they're the showpiece of any Sinclair collection. Of the ten carts, *Jetpac* usually commands the highest price (around £70-80 in very good condition), probably because it's such a classic game.

DISEASE DODGERS

CODE: **4327**

■ Back in the day, all the kids wanted this 'game' that explored the relationship between health, diet and exercise. Actually, they didn't at all, but collectors jolly well do now and they're willing to pay £140-160 for it when it comes up for grabs. It may actually go for more, as a complete copy sold on eBay in August 2017 for a healthy £190.





PLANET PATROL

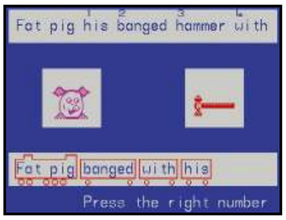
CODE: **4326**

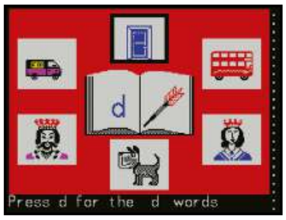
■ Looking at the cover art you'd be forgiven for thinking that this was a space shooter rather than an educational strategy title. Along with *Disease Dodgers* this is one of the rarest of the *Science Horizons* series developed by Five Ways. It fetches £100-£140, but back in December 2013 a copy sold on eBay for £363! Cosmic.

WORDSETTER

CODE: **4329**

■ Fisher-Marriot Software developed five numbered *Learn To Read* titles for Macmillan/Sinclair in 1983, but it's the later silver-box titles that are closely studied in collecting circles. This sentence-ordering card game is currently valued in the £120-£160 range, but has known to go for more (an eBay copy sold for £232 back in January 2016).





SOUNDABOUT

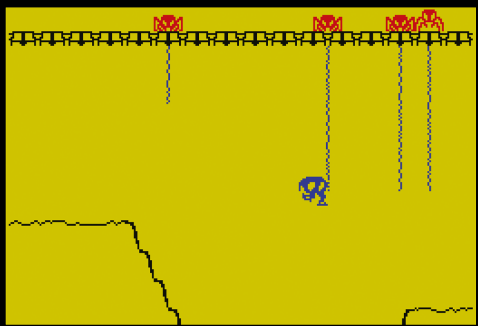
CODE: **4331**

■ Another of the *Learn To Read* titles, and another obscure silver-box release that is now on the wishlist of many Sinclair collectors. This is one of the more difficult titles to value as its price has varied quite a bit over the years, but it's never cheap. A copy went on eBay for £315 in December 2013, and more recently in January 2016 it fetched £228.



produced silver labels were used, meaning that many titles are available with both white and silver variants; great fun for completionists. Sinclair was clearly fond of silver and many of the later titles – from *Bubble Buster* (G32/S) onwards – sported silver inlays which are now coveted by collectors. Finally, in 1984, Sinclair decided to drop the usual spine codes and replace them with its internal stock number system. This is why releases starting with *Match Point* have a four-digit spine code (4XXX) instead.

There are a couple of curious anomalies in the line-up. *Tranz Am* was released on ROM cartridge but, unlike the other three Ultimate titles (*Jetpac, Pssst* and *Cookie*) there is seemingly no corresponding tape release, despite it being assigned a code (G29/S). Similarly, there is no title assigned to code 4037, which sits in a vacant slot between 4036 (*Match Point*) and 4038



» [ZX Spectrum] The third *Horace* game, *Horace And The Spiders*, was available on both cassette and cartridge.

(*Panama Joe*). Both are mysteries that will surely endure.

So what can collectors expect to pay for Sinclair software? Well the value of ZX81 software is particularly fluid. On eBay the same title may go for £2 one week and £20 the next. There are, however, several semi-rare titles: *Music 1, Spelling 1* and *History 1*, as well as the Super Programs series and the games *Mothership* and *Thro' The Wall*. For these you'd typically expect to pay £20-£25. On the Spectrum there's slightly more certainty, and most of the titles can be picked up pretty cheaply. At the extreme low end you have the 'Spectrum Six Pack' titles that were bundled with the computer – stuff like *Horace Goes Skiing, Chequered Flag, Computer Scrabble, Survival* and everyone's favourite *Make-A-Chip*. These are plentiful and can be grabbed for pennies.

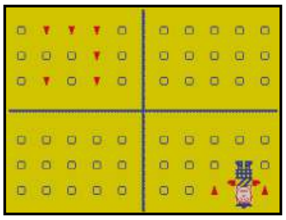
Most of the other Spectrum titles hover around the £5 mark, with the silver inlay releases going for maybe double that. Much more desirable are the ten ROM cartridge releases which typically go

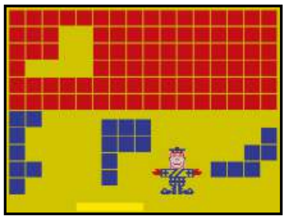


MACMAN'S MAGIC MIRROR

CODE: **4335**

■ "Meet MacMan, the canny Scot who takes children on a fun-packed maths adventure." So reads the blurb on *Magic Mirror*, the first of the four *MacMan* games. To acquire these titles nowadays really is a maths adventure, as you calculate how much of your overdraft they'll chew up. A copy of this title sold on eBay for £240 in 2016.





MACMAN AND THE GREAT ESCAPE

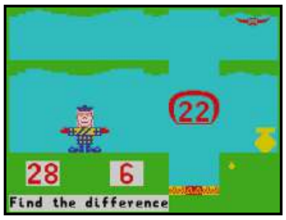
CODE: **4336**

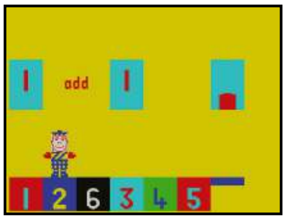
■ Like all of the *MacMan* titles this one hardly comes up for sale and when it does there's always a commotion. As an example, a copy sold on eBay for £315 in December 2013, and another hit £225 in January 2016. When it surfaces again it will likely go for somewhere between those two values.

MACMAN IN THE TREASURE CAVES

CODE: **4334**

■ More mischief from Mr MacMan. Each of the titles will easily fetch three figures. This one hit £175 on eBay in December 2013, and in August this year a copy sold for £299.99. Selling at a fixed price is becoming the norm these days so expect to see similar examples snapped up without a bidding war.





MACMAN AND THE CABER EATER

CODE: **4333**

■ This is the big one. It has fetched varied prices in the past, but stands out thanks to an eBay auction in July 2013 where a copy sold for an incredible £448.23! To our knowledge this is the highest amount ever paid for a Speccy title. Who would have thought that a title like this would be so valuable?

THE PAWN

CODE: **5520**

■ The QL titles are not too common and a few fetch good prizes. It's the text adventures that are most sought after, with *Classic Adventures* valued at £25-£30, and this, the debut release of Magnetic Scrolls' *The Pawn*, typically fetching £30-40. Value is dependent on condition (does the microdrive cart still work?) and whether the silver slipcase is present.





» [Sinclair QL] Psion's *Match Point* debuted on the Spectrum and was later converted to the QL.

for £50-80 (Sinclair seemed to produce the carts in equal quantities so none stand out as being 'rare', although the Ultimate titles unsurprisingly attract the most attention). The price is generally determined by condition – if the case is not battered and the cartridge has its all-important red skirt then its value will increase.

Where the craziness occurs is with the silver-boxed educational titles that were published in conjunction with Macmillan Software. These were hardly desirable and didn't sell well, so now they're supremely scarce. You'll be looking to pay at least three figures for most of them, and in particular the quartet of *MacMan* titles are sure to break the bank. Be warned – when it comes to those releases you can expect bidding madness. ✱

Special thanks to Jake Warren, Richard Burton, and Rich Mellor of RWAP Software.





SINCLAIR CHECKLIST

A run-down of all of the titles released for the ZX81, Spectrum and Sinclair QL. How many have you got?

ZX81

Title	Code	Developer	Year
1K Games	G22	Artic Computing	1981
1K ZX Chess	G17	Artic Computing	1982
Adventure A: Planet Of Death	G18	Artic Computing	1981
Adventure B: Inca Curse	G19	Artic Computing	1981
Adventure C: The Ship Of Doom	G20	Artic Computing	1982
Adventure D: Espionage Island	G21	Artic Computing	1982
Backgammon *(plus Dice)*	G10	Psion	1982
Biorhythms	G9	ICL	1982
Chess *(plus Chess-Clock)*	G11	Mikro-Gen	1981
City Patrol	G24	Macronics	1982
Club Record Controller	B2	ICL	1982
Collector's Pack	B1	ICL	1982
English Literature 1	E1	ICL	1982
English Literature 2	E2	ICL	1982
Fantasy Games	G12	Psion	1981
Flight Simulation	G14	Psion	1982
Forth	L1	Artic Computing	1983
Geography 1	E3	ICL	1982
History 1	E4	ICL	1982
Inventions 1	E7	ICL	1982
Learning Lab	20	Trevor Toms	1981
Mathematics 1	E5	ICL	1982
Mothership	G26	Softsync	1982
Music 1	E6	ICL	1982
Reversi	G15	MOI	1982
Sabotage	G25	Macronics	1982
Space Raiders *(plus Bomber)*	G13	Mikro-Gen	1982
Spelling 1	E8	ICL	1982
Super Glooper *(plus Frogs)*	G23	Mikro-Gen	1982
Super Programs 1	G1	ICL	1981
Super Programs 2	G2	ICL	1981
Super Programs 3	G3	ICL	1981
Super Programs 4	G4	ICL	1981
Super Programs 5	G5	ICL	1981
Super Programs 6	G6	ICL	1981
Super Programs 7	G7	ICL	1982
Super Programs 8	G8	ICL	1982
Thro' The Wall	G16	Mikro-Gen	1982
Toolkit	P1	Artic Computing	1982
VU-Calc	B3	Psion	1982
VU-File *(plus Example)*	B4	Psion	1982

ZX SPECTRUM

Title	Code	Developer	Year
Adventure A: Planet Of Death	G14/S	Artic Computing	1982
Adventure B: Inca Curse	G15/S	Artic Computing	1982
Adventure C: The Ship Of Doom	G16/S	Artic Computing	1982
Adventure D: Espionage Island	G17/S	Artic Computing	1982
Alphabet Games	E24/S	Blackboard Software	1983
Alphabetter	4328	Fisher-Marriott	1985
Apostrophe, The	E21/S	Blackboard Software	1983
Backgammon	G22/S	Psion	1983
Backgammon *(Cart)*	G22/R	Psion	1983
Beyond BASIC	E8/S	Incognito Software	1984
Biorhythms	G8/S	ICL	1982
Bodyswop	4332	Fisher-Marriott	1985
Bubble Buster	G32/S	Hudson Soft	1984
Capital Letters	E22/S	Blackboard Software	1983
Cargo	E15/S	Five Ways Software	1985
Castle Spellerous	E23/S	Blackboard Software	1983
Cattell IQ Test	P1/S	Victor Serebriakoff	1983
Chequered Flag	G31/S	Psion	1983
Chess	G10/S	Mikro-Gen	1983
Chess *(Cart)*	G10/R	Mikro-Gen	1983
Chess Tutor 1	E9/S	Braveline	1983
Club Record Controller	B5/S	ICL	1982
Collector's Pack	B4/S	ICL	1981
Computer Scrabble	G25/S	Psion	1983
Cookie	G30/S	Ultimate	1983
Cookie *(Cart)*	G30/R	Ultimate	1983
Cyrus IS Chess	G23/S	Intelligent Software	1983
Disease Dodgers	4327	Five Ways Software	1985
Driller Tanks	G33/S	Hudson Soft	1983
Early Punctuation	E19/S	Blackboard Software	1983
Embassy Assault	G20/S	ICL	1982
English Literature 1	E5/S	ICL	1982
Eric And The Floaters	G34/S	Hudson Soft	1984
Estimator Racer	4338	Psion	1984
Flight Simulation	G11/S	Psion	1983
Flippit	G26/S	ICL	1983
Forth	L1/S	Artic Computing	1982
Games 1	G1/S	ICL	1982
Games 2	G2/S	ICL	1982
Games 3	G3/S	ICL	1982
Games 4	G4/S	ICL	1982
Games 5	G5/S	ICL	1982
Geography 1	E2/S	ICL	1982
Glider	E16/S	Five Ways Software	1984
History 1	E1/S	ICL	1982
Hobbit, The	G19/S	Melbourne House	1982
Horace And The Spiders	G24/S	Melbourne House	1983
Horace And The Spiders *(Cart)*	G24/R	Melbourne House	1983
Horace Goes Skiing	G21/S	Melbourne House	1982
Hungry Horace	G13/S	Melbourne House	1982
Hungry Horace *(Cart)*	G13/R	Melbourne House	1982
Inventions 1	E3/S	ICL	1982
Jetpac	G27/S	Ultimate	1983
Jetpac *(Cart)*	G27/R	Ultimate	1983
Learn To Read 1	E10/S	Fisher-Marriott	1983
Learn To Read 2	E11/S	Fisher-Marriott	1983
Learn To Read 3	E12/S	Fisher-Marriott	1983
Learn To Read 4	E13/S	Fisher-Marriott	1983
Learn To Read 5	E14/S	Fisher-Marriott	1983
Logo	L6/S	LCSI/SOLI	1984
MacMan And The Caber Eater	4333	Intelligent Software	1981
MacMan And The Great Escape	4336	Intelligent Software	1985
MacMan In The Treasure Caves	4334	Intelligent Software	1985
MacMan's Magic Mirror	4335	Intelligent Software	1984
Magnets	E18/S	Five Ways Software	1984
Make-A-Chip	E6/S	Incognito Software	1984
Match Point	4036	Psion	1984
Micro-PROLOG	L2/S	LPA	1983
Monitor And Disassembler	L4/S	Crystal Computing	1982
Music 1	E4/S	ICL	1982
Music Master	E7/S	Incognito Software	1984





Title	Code	Developer	Year
Number Painter	4337	Psion	1984
Oil Strike	4324	Five Ways Software	1984
Panama Joe	4038	Parker Software	1984
Pastimes 1	G6/S	ICL	1982
Pastimes 2	G7/S	ICL	1982
Planet Patrol	4326	Five Ways Software	1984
Planetoids *(plus Missile)*	G12/S	Psion	1982
Planetoids *(Cart)*	G12/R	Psion	1982
Print Utilities	L5/S	Andrew Pennell	1983
Pssst	G28/S	Ultimate	1983
Pssst *(Cart)*	G28/R	Ultimate	1983
Return of the Jedi: Death Star Battle	4039	Parker Software	1984
Reversi	G18/S	MOI	1982
Small Business Accounts	B6/S	Willden Services	1983
Soundabout	4331	Fisher-Marriott	1985
Space Raiders	G9/S	Psion	1982
Space Raiders *(Cart)*	G9/R	Psion	1982
Speech Marks	E20/S	Blackboard Software	1983
Spellbox	4330	Fisher-Marriott	1985
Stop The Express	G35/S	Hudson Soft	1983
Survival	E17/S	Five Ways Software	1984
Tasword Two	4607	Tasman Software	1983
Tiny Touch 'N' Go	4608	Goldstar	1984
Tranz Am *(Cart)*	G29/R	Ultimate	1983
VU-3D	B3/S	Psion	1982
VU-Calc	B1/S	Psion	1982
VU-File	B2/S	Psion	1982
Weathermaster	4325	Five Ways Software	1984
Which? Tax Calculator 1983-84	B7/S	Consumers' Association	1984
Wordsetter	4329	Fisher-Marriott	1985
Zeus Assembler	L3/S	Crystal Computing	1983
Zipper Flipper	G36/S	RED/Sunshine	1984

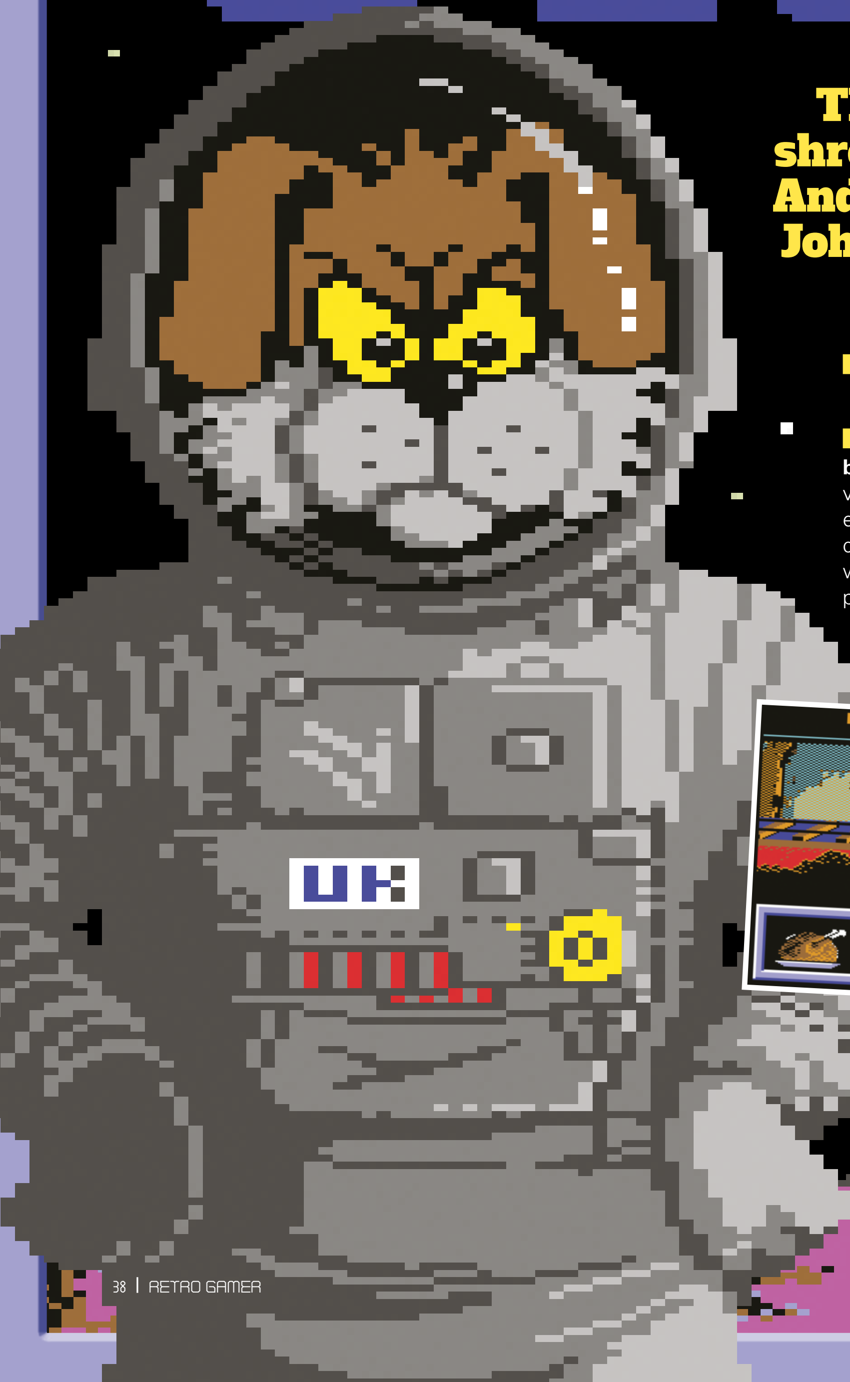
SINCLAIR QL

Title	Code	Developer	Year
Assembler	5501	Computer Systems	1984
Bounder	5519	Brian Kelly	1985
Cash Trader	5503	Accounting Software	1984
Cavern	5514	JMF	1985
Chess	5500	Psion	1984
Classic Adventures	5524	Abersoft	1985
Decision Maker	5507	Triptych	1985
Entrepreneur	5506	Triptych	1985
Fictionary	5517	Whoopee	1985
Gardener	5515	Gordian Computing	1985
Home Finance	5513	Buzzz Software	1985
Integrated Accounts	5508	SageSoft	1985
Jabber	5523	Arrakis	1984
Macro Assembler	5516	GST	1985
Meteor Storm	5510	Arrakis	1985
Monitor	5509	Qjump	1985
Paint	5521	Talent	1985
Pawn, The	5520	Magnetic Scrolls	1985
Project Planner	5505	Triptych	1985
Quboids	5522	AJS	1985
Reversi	5518	Games of Skill	1984
Toolkit	5502	Qjump	1985
Touch 'N' Go	5504	Harcourt Systems	1985



THE MAKING OF STAR PAWS

The origin of Star Paws has been shrouded in mystery for many years. Andrew Fisher talks to programmers John Darnell and Ste Cork about the game's creation



I have long got used to the myth that Matthew Smith invented a game and I adapted it to become *Star Paws*," **begins John Darnell.** "The truth is very different to the legend." In the early Eighties John took a programming course by chance, leading to an interview with Software Projects. "I had never played a game on a computer, let alone had any idea how to write one! They gave me a desk, a C64 and told me to, 'Write a game.' I conceived a platformer game where a character went sleepwalking and the main character had to get him back to bed. I called it *Sleepwalker*." Software Projects released the rights to John, who later tried to sell it to Mirrorsoft. The project ended up laying dormant for many years.

After working on the C64 *Dragon's Lair* ports, John needed a new project. "I had been watching different cartoons, including *Roadrunner*, with my daughter at home. I suggested that I had ideas for a *Roadrunner* game to Alan Maton and he told me to go ahead while he chased down the licence. Matthew Smith was not around, he was still 'working' on *Miner Willy Meets The Taxman*, or *Megatree*… or something like that. Myself and two artists, Martin McDonald and Nicole Baikaloff, began developing a game based on the cartoon."



Software Projects gave Matthew the office next to John's, in hopes of motivating Matthew. "Our *Roadrunner* game had at least one working scene and Matthew was invited, commissioned, or maybe ordered, to produce a Spectrum conversion. He

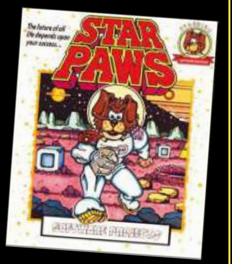


» [C64] The Space Griffin sometimes brings on a trampoline to bounce the shot back at Rover.

"The zany humour was inspired by cartoons such as Tom & Jerry, Roadrunner, and also film icons such as Laurel & Hardy" John Darnell

sat down, and in a short time (he was a genius) had a brilliant *Looney Tunes* 'That's All Folks' writing on the screen. The artists and I produced a scrolling desert scene. Matthew produced the beginnings of a scene with Roadrunner in a canyon. In reality, Software Projects had two independent games under development at the same time, but, to my knowledge, Matthew's version never went any further."

Then disaster struck. "Alan discovered US Gold had acquired the licence and were working on an official *Roadrunner* game [converting the Atari coin-op]. We had a working sideways scroll scene and we had a laser cannon scene. I suggested rather than scrap the work we had done, we change the graphics and come up with a new story. Wile E Coyote was fitted with a spacesuit and became Captain Rover Pawstrong. Roadrunner became Tasty Space Griffin. The setting changed from desert to outer space and our *Roadrunner* game became *Star Paws*. Matthew had nothing to do with this, he was rarely around."



STAR PAWS 101

■ John Darnell watched classic cartoons with his daughter and wanted to create a Roadrunner game – but when Software Projects failed to get the licence, a new backstory and look turned it into *Star Paws* with Captain Rover Pawstrong chasing down the Tasty Space Griffins. A bold gamble to launch the game at a cheaper price did not succeed.

"One day, I was shown the cassette insert for *Attack Of The Mutant Zombie Flesh Eating Chickens From Mars*," says John. "It was explained this was to further pressure Matthew to produce a game. There was a dog (Zappo) and Space Chickens. I don't know where the title came from, or even if Matthew had anything to do with it. It would be typical of his zany humour, but, to my knowledge, there never was any code written towards actually producing a game. Zappo was likely inspired by my decision to turn Wile E Coyote into Captain Rover Pawstrong. That's not as romantic so far as the legend of Matthew Smith is concerned, but it is the way it happened!" Steve Leyland, a friend of Matthew's, had created the *Mutant Chickens* loading screen. At the Classic Gaming Expo UK, Matthew revealed he once slept on a pallet of *Mutant Chickens* cases.

S*tar Paws* sees pirates breeding Tasty Space Griffins (so delicious they are galactic currency) on a distant moon. A faulty space telex summons Captain Rover Pawstrong to save the day instead of Neil Armstrong. There are 20 birds to capture – ten on the surface, five in the mines (requiring a lamp) and five to be killed with the laser cannon (reached via teleporter, after collecting ammo from the mines). Catching a bird on the surface sees the flying saucer drop off a new gadget. Rover's energy meter is a gradually depleting Space Griffin.

So where did ideas come from? "The zany humour was inspired by cartoons such as *Tom & Jerry*, *Roadrunner*, and also film icons such as Laurel & Hardy and Buster Keaton. A supposedly superior character is constantly being outwitted and humiliated by a supposedly inferior character," John reveals. "The various gadgets were typical of the deliveries Wile E Coyote received from the ACME Company." The Space Griffin reflecting the ▶



» [ZX Spectrum] Think Rover bares a resemblance to Wile E Coyote? Well, that's no coincidence.

CONVERSION CAPERS



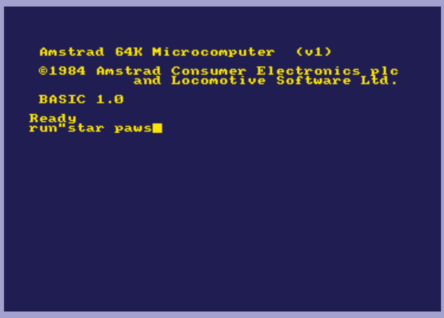
COMMODORE 64

■ The original and best, thanks to its excellent parallax scrolling and the superb Rob Hubbard music that drives the action along. Minor graphic glitches and a 'sliding crate' bug are trivial blemishes. It was worthy of the ZZAP! Sizzler and the C&VG Hit it earned.



ZX SPECTRUM

■ Ste Cork did a great job with his Spectrum conversion. Large graphics and smooth scrolling impress. The puzzle games work really well, too. Spectrum 128 users got the bonus of Tim Follin's brilliant AY conversion of the music, capturing the energy and bounce of the original tunes.



AMSTRAD CPC

■ This version was advertised at the same time but never released. Ste Cork would have been a prime candidate for the conversion, no doubt based on the Spectrum Z80 code, but he had left Software Creations after unsuccessfully attempting to port his Spectrum *Psycho Pigs UXB* to the Amstrad.

RESKINNED GAMES



PUYO PUYO > KIRBY'S AVALANCHE

SNES

■ This was reskinned twice for overseas release – as *Dr Robotnik's Mean Bean Machine* for Mega Drive, and *Kirby's Avalanche*/*Ghost* Trap on SNES – before the series became more well-known globally under its own name. For more on the *Puyo Puyo* franchise, check out our Ultimate Guide in issue 169.



ELEVATOR ACTION EX > DEXTER'S LABORATORY: ROBOT RAMPAGE

GAME BOY COLOUR

■ An updated *Elevator Action* was released in Japan and Europe, but the reskinned version became a tie-in to *Dexter's Laboratory*. *Robot Rampage* sees the boy genius using the lifts and escalators in his lab, trying to find codes to shut off the rampaging robots.



MAGICAL HAT FLYING TURBO ADVENTURE > DECAP ATTACK

MEGA DRIVE

■ Based on anime series *Magical Hat*, developer Vic Tokai could not get a worldwide licence – so the game underwent a transformation to become *Decap Attack*. With a much darker tone, the star was Chuck D Head, a mummy who threw a homing skull at enemies.

REVIVING SLEEPWALKER

How John Darnell's boredom led to a new game

After 30 years, John had just the original *Sleepwalker* map and some practice C64 code left. "Early 2016 I developed a hernia. This meant I could not work and I was soon very, very bored. My wife, Glenys, brightly suggested, 'You could write a new game from scratch.'" So John set about remaking *Sleepwalker*. "The original was a great idea, but it looked and played like someone's first game, which of course it was. Based on years of experience, I have written a different game. The basic idea of having to find a sleepwalking character is the same." Using cross-development tools on the PC, and with the help of Glenys, Trevor Storey and Carl Mason (graphics) and Joachim Wijnhoven (music), a new *Sleepwalker* for the C64 has emerged, published by Psytronik Software (psytronik.net). The security guard at a funfair discovers his teddy bear has gone sleepwalking, and must guide him back to bed before time runs out. It also inspired John to go back to writing games, working from the Gameplus facility in Canberra. "I looked at *Sleepwalker* nearing completion, and thought to myself, 'Even though I haven't done it for 30 years, I can still make games!' The game now is so different from the Commodore 64 version and has so many added features it needed a new name. *Bear Beware* will soon be available for phones, tablets, PC and Mac. I love the Nintendo Switch and I hope to release it for that also."

laser cannon with a trampoline was inspired by a *Roadrunner* episode. Some crates contain bonus puzzles, with the player reassembling a picture of Rover. "I had seen a similar idea used in *Split Personalities*. I thought it would be simple to program, we had memory available; I wanted an entertaining break for the player, so I put it in!"

The C64 version impresses with parallax scrolling. "With Kane, I learned how to scroll the screen with two horizontal slices at different speeds. For *Star Paws* there were four slices – the rocks in the foreground, the 'road', the mountains, and the planets and stars. In order to look correct when scrolling, each slice had to move at a proportionally different speed to the others. And for each speed Rover was moving, there had to be a different speed scroll for each slice of screen." It relied on the built-in scrolling and a table of values. "The maths had to be kept simple, so the pixels moved each frame could only be a whole number. It was simply a case of experimenting with the table. My philosophy for games is, 'If it looks right, it is right!'"

John enthuses about Rob Hubbard's music. "Rob revolutionised C64 music. He was an incredible mix of musical and programming ability; he got music out of the C64 which no one had achieved before. When we were working on *Dragon's Lair II* I asked Software Projects if I could approach Rob. It was only natural that I approach Rob for *Star Paws*. I absolutely loved, and still do, the music he developed."

Trouble struck again, as Software Projects released the game at £5.99 on tape – compared to the usual price of £9.99. "A game without a famous film or character tie-in was unlikely to sell, so without any consultation with the industry, they announced a price of £5.99," remembers John. "US Gold were the biggest distributor of games in the UK and they also wrote games. They were in competition with their suppliers, a conflict of interest but a smart move.



IN THE KNOW

» **DEVELOPER:** Software Projects
» **PUBLISHER:** In-house
» **RELEASED:** 1987
» **PLATFORM:** C64, ZX Spectrum
» **GENRE:** Platformer

DEVELOPER HIGHLIGHTS

HYSTERIA
SYSTEM: C64, ZX SPECTRUM
YEAR: 1987

DRAGON'S LAIR
SYSTEM: VARIOUS
YEAR: 1986

JET SET WILLY
SYSTEM: VARIOUS
YEAR: 1984



» [ZX Spectrum] The Speccy version of *Star Paws* boasts some decent scrolling effects.



RANMA ½: CHOUNAI GEKITOHEN > STREET COMBAT

SNES

■ The first game in the *Ranma ½* series underwent a dramatic change for the US market, with sci-fi characters, including blonde cyborg Steven replacing the original manga characters. It was received badly by critics at the time, and later *Ranma* games would be released overseas with little or no change.

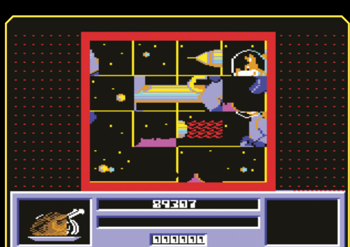


» [C64] The mothership gathers the remains of the captured Space Griffin (well, it's too delicious to waste).

Software Projects invited the relevant people, including directors of US Gold, to the Grand National in Liverpool where we hired a tent for drinks and officially launched the game. I sat down with one of the directors of US Gold and asked him, 'What do you think of the game?' He growled his answer: 'It reminds me of something!' A few days later I was told that CentreSoft [the distribution company owned by US Gold] had ordered a measly ten copies. Why would they help a better game to sell when they had sunk money into their own *Roadrunner* game? Why would other distributors support a new price point and smaller profit margins when they hadn't even been consulted? They didn't. Had we obtained the official licence, it could all have been very different."

Good reviews arrived. "I was, and still am, extremely proud of *Star Paws* as the pinnacle of my creative abilities in the Eighties. The reviews reflect how *Star Paws* was viewed by people who knew games." And there was a surprise for those making pirate copies. "The protection I put inside the tape version wasn't discovered by the pirates and the game starts to corrupt after a few minutes. I wrote it with self-modifying code and undocumented instructions."

John has one last story. "I was playing the game through. Matthew came in from his office next door, watched for a few minutes, and gave me an unforgettable compliment "Fucking well done John!" Coming from the legend that Matthew was and my respect for him as a designer, I consider that to be an amazing compliment."



» [C64] One of the bonus levels, where you are charged with reassembling a picture of Rover.

> **"I was, and still am, extremely proud of Star Paws as the pinnacle of my creative abilities in the Eighties"** John Darnell

I was just given a C64 copy to look at and instructions of 'port that across'", says Ste Cork, Spectrum *Star Paws'* programmer. "Software Creations didn't have many Spectrum programmers there, and the others were busy with higher-profile games." How did he achieve smooth scrolling? "Straight-lined sprite functions, carefully working out what needed to come from a back buffer and what could be drawn to the front screen instead, some custom scroll functions, and a switch to character-scrolling (far cheaper for CPU time) once the speed got up higher and you wouldn't notice." The puzzle sections looked good. "I had one of the artists draw something in the style of the game, then wrote some code to make that into a puzzle and swizzle the pieces around. The transitions to and from the puzzle screen and the laser cannon area were ones I'd used in various other games, so they just got dropped in."

Software Creations' Tim Follin successfully recreated Rob's tunes. "It was pretty much a spot-on copy," Ste says. "It all existed in one of the new memory banks that the 128K Spectrum had. If you played it in 48k there was no sound chip, so the music didn't get loaded." The conversion earned eights and nines from Spectrum magazines. "I think it possibly rested too much on the technical laurels. It was a pretty accurate conversion, but honestly I don't think it was that interesting to play. I didn't like the vertical controls much, or the toe-stub collision, but I just copied what the C64 did. I did enjoy writing it though, it was interesting to make a Spectrum behave that way. My only cop-out was the lighting in the underground level. I think it might have done some palette trickery on the C64 which the Spectrum changed to just on or off. There was a certain amount of (my) programmer-art underground too, which wasn't great." Ste then converted *Psycho Pigs UXB* to the Spectrum, but he left the company soon after. "I heard Software Projects approached them with another game they wanted porting to the Spectrum, and insisted the same guy (me) work on it, but it was too late by then." That left the Amstrad port of *Star Paws* in limbo.

Years later in a charity shop in Liverpool – close to where Software Projects had been based – Keith Ainsworth of *Retrogamer* fanzine (no relation to us) discovered a *Mutant Chickens* cassette case and inlay. John reveals he kept one for his collection. We may never know what that game was like, but we can play *Star Paws*. *

CLASSIC MOMENTS

Lionheart

» **PLATFORM:** AMIGA » **DEVELOPER:** THALION » **RELEASED:** 1993

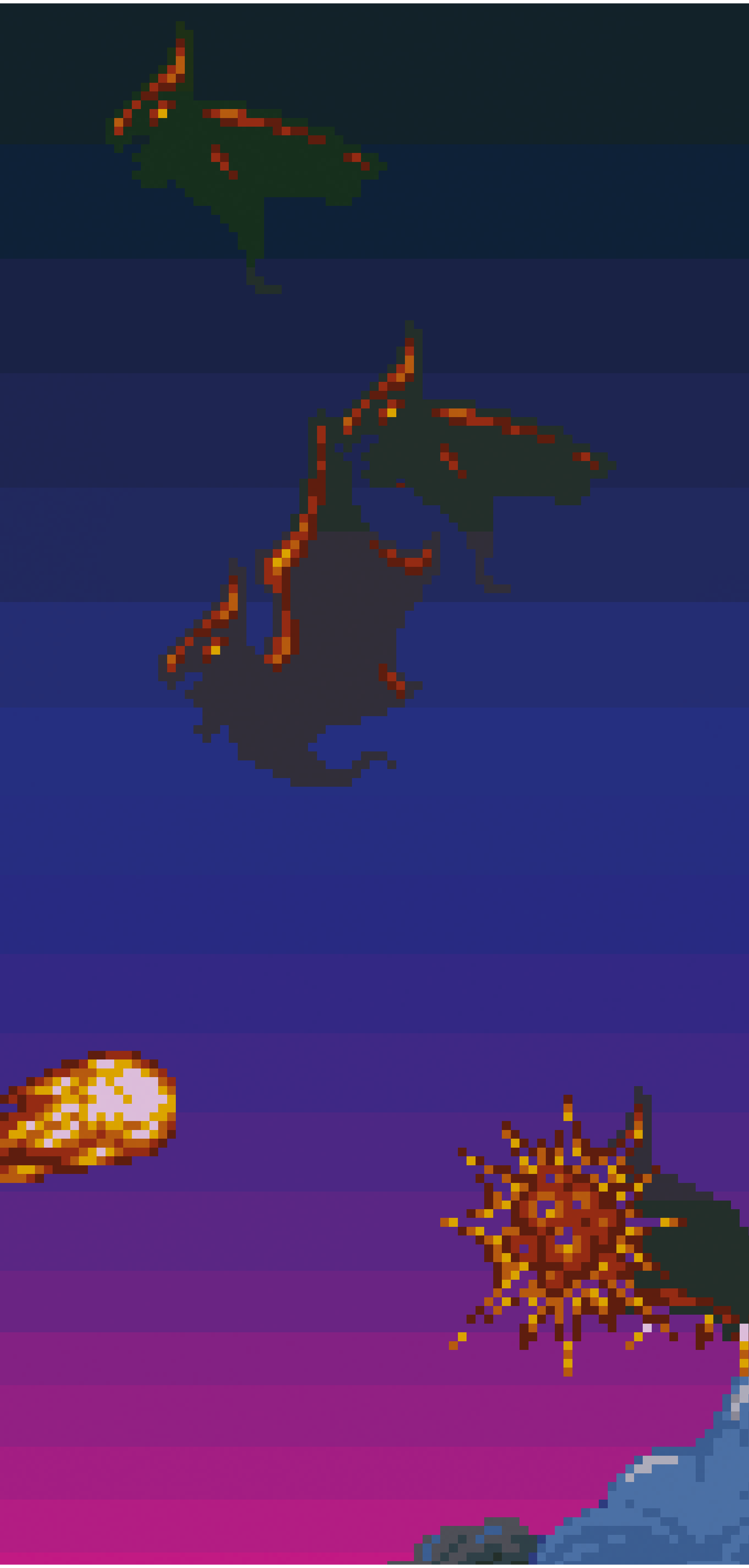
You're making great progress in *Lionheart*, and Valdyn has already overcome some impressive obstacles in his pursuit of the villainous Norka – fighting enormous creatures, navigating treacherous terrain and even riding a dinosaur. However, Norka's base of operations is a flying fortress, and flight isn't amongst the talents available to the cat people. But that's not going to stop Valdyn.

Taking to the sky on a fire-breathing dragon, your hero breaks free from his platform gaming chains and turns *Lionheart* into a shoot-'em-up for one highly memorable level. You can control the direction of the fireballs to aim blasts directly at the enemies, whose dark presence threatens to blot out a beautiful sunset sky. Then, when you're through taking down the cannon fodder, the true test of your skills emerges – a metallic dragon simulacrum, with a mouth-mounted laser beam instead of the fiery breath of the real thing. Fight past this last line of defence by taking out the pilot, and you'll have earned access to the fiend's lair. *

BIO

Other developers might have respected the Amiga's technical limitations, but Thalion couldn't have given two hoots about them – technically impressive games were the developer's strong suit. *Lionheart* is a great example of this, as the platform hack-and-slash action wasn't the most original concept to grace a home computer, but the presentation left critics wondering how anything would ever top it. Unfortunately, the commercial achievements of Thalion's games were never as impressive as the technical ones. *Lionheart* was the studio's penultimate original game, with Ambermoon being the last before the company closed its doors for good in 1994.





MORE CLASSIC LIONHEART MOMENTS

Visual Overload



To see *Lionheart* running on an Amiga was to be blown away by a shocking display of graphical power. The game used every trick in the book, displaying hundreds of colours and impressive parallax effects, while still offering smooth animation. But it wasn't just a technical showcase – all of the programming cleverness only served to enhance Henk Nieborg's already distinctive art.

Walk The Dinosaur



As we already mentioned, Valdyn gets to ride a dinosaur – and that's not all this level is memorable for, as you find yourself under attack from a massive airship which wants to bomb you back to the Jurassic era. You'll need to hop on and off your steed in order to fend off the most dangerous enemy of the game so far.

Tower Of Terror



Climbing a tower using a series of swinging platforms is tricky at the best of times, and Valdyn is under attack from various enemies as usual. But the thing that really piles on the pressure during this perilous ascent is the presence of rising waters, because our heroic cat person is incapable of swimming and will drown if you spend your time faffing around.

Burning Man



If you want to add an element of danger to any event, add some fire. When that event is a fight with a creature that's already twice the height of you and hell-bent on ensuring that you die in the most painful way possible, making that creature out of fire is indisputably a case of Too Much Danger™. Run away!



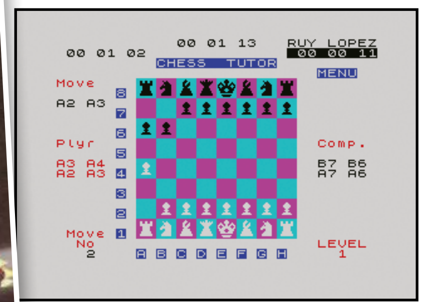
artic Computing Ltd

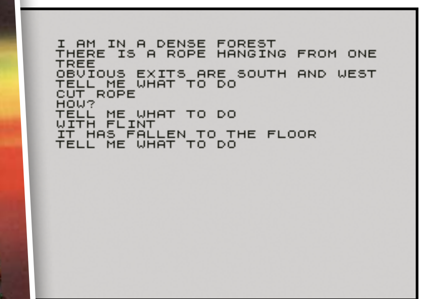
Set up 35 years ago by a bunch of university students, Artic Computing may have been short-lived, but it introduced some of gaming's most talented developers, as David Crookes reveals





» Artic certainly had a wide range of games available as this advert shows.





» [ZX81] *A Planet of Death* was the name of Artic's *Adventure A*, starting the ball rolling for text adventures.

Instant Expert

- Artic primarily concentrated on the ZX81 home computer market at first.
- **The company also created games for the ZX Spectrum, Commodore 64, CPC, BBC Micro, Acorn Electron, VIC-20 and Oric.**
- Artic helped kickstart the adventure game craze on the Speccy.
- **Charles Cecil, of Revolution Software fame, produced *Adventures B, C* and *D*.**
- Jon Ritman also kickstarted his career at Artic with his first game, *Namtir Raiders*.
- **Each of Jon's games sold roughly 6,000 copies or so.**
- Artic packaged its own games but Sinclair Research and Amsoft published some, too.
- **The company was initially based in Hull and moved to Brandesburton.**
- Cofounder Richard Turner was offered £50 for his first game.
- **An appearance at a ZX Microfair changed Artic's fortunes.**
- Artic typically paid royalties of 20 per cent to its developers.
- **The company was not adverse to cloning games: *Artic's Galaxians* was one of the best versions.**
- *Ship Of Doom* was slammed in UK newspaper *The Sun* for responding to expletives.
- **One of Artic's games, *World Cup Carnival*, got 0% in *Amstrad Action*.**

It was a glorious summer's day in June 1982 and Richard Turner had been enjoying the dangerous thrills of the annual Isle of Man TT motorcycle event. Along with tens of thousands of others, he had watched the bikers roar around 37.3 miles of undulating public roads, reaching speeds of more than 200 miles per hour. Yet, unbeknown to him, there was another drama taking place on this self-governing British Crown dependency: his mother had been ringing his hotel, frantically trying to speak to him.

Richard was the cofounder of Artic Computing, a software development company he set up in 1980 with a friend called Chris Thornton. He had become interested in computing the previous year when his school bought a Commodore PET, but his most fond memory was of penning BASIC games in a jotter with Chris before walking three miles to the retailer Tandy and typing them in on a TRS-80 to see if they worked. "It was a bit sad, really," he laughs. "But that's the way we rolled at the time."

When he turned 18, he was given a life-changing choice. "I could either have a party at a local disco or £100 for a ZX80 computer," he says. He pondered this for mere seconds before blurting out, "I'll have a ZX80, please." The Sinclair computer enabled Richard and Chris to write games on a machine that wasn't sitting on a shop shelf, and it led to his first published title. "I saw an advert in one of the computer magazines which said they could buy games that people had written," he remembers. "So we sent a tape with the game on – I can't remember what it was – and the guy offered us £50 to which I replied, 'Oh yeah, thanks.'"

It wasn't until a little while later that Richard realised this was a mistake. He saw an advert for his game in a magazine and noticed it was selling for £5.95. "And I thought, bloody hell, he only has to sell ten of them and he makes a profit," Richard recalls. "It was then that we thought we should start publishing our own games. We went to a ZX Microfair at the Royal Horticultural Halls in London and set up a little trestle table. I took my first ever £50 note and around £1,000 that day."

The earliest titles included the text-only grid-based dungeon game *Sword Of Peace* for the ZX80 and ZX81, the primitive-looking *Zombies* for the ZX81 and the self-explanatory *ZX Chess* for the same machine. Artic had also begun dabbling with text adventures, developing *Adventure A: Planet of Death* in 1981 and – with the assistance of fledgling games creator Charles Cecil – *Adventure B: Inca Curse*. Richard and Charles met on a sponsorship programme for Ford and they played arcade games together in the evenings.

Charles' second game was the reason why Richard's mum was so keen to get in touch, however. Called *Adventure C: Ship of Doom*, it was another slice of interaction fiction, this time starting in a space craft which had been swallowed by a gigantic space station. The player had to leave the ship, board the alien craft and find the tractor beam control in order to fly free. It had a simple verb-noun command interface in line with the previous two adventures and – as expected with such games at the time – no graphics. But, as Richard soon learned, once he managed to phone home, *The Sun* newspaper wanted to talk to him about it.

"A mother had complained to her MP that she had caught her son typing in expletives which it responded to," Richard recalls, "and *The Sun* wanted a statement." The problem, it transpired, was the presence of an android pleasure room and the ability to type crude ▶



» [Amstrad CPC] Arcade-style adventure *Aladdin's Cave* looked nice enough, but it sounded awful and played slowly.



Keeping up appearances

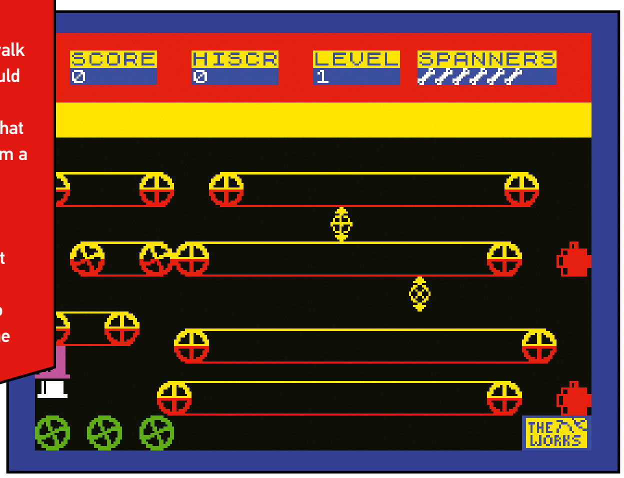
In the early days of Artic, Richard Turner, Chris Thornton and Charles Cecil were still at university, juggling their fledgling business with their studies. They worked hard to present a professional front, but it wasn't always easy.

"I remember phoning John Rollands, who was the main computer games buyer at WHSmith," says Charles. "I was at Manchester University, and didn't have a telephone at my student flat, so I had to walk into the city centre to find a phone that could be paid in advance, wait for the busses to pass, and then make the call in the hope that John would believe that I was phoning from a proper office."

Arctic also became prey for numerous 'sharks' seeking to advise them about the best way forward. "By far the most honest was our solicitor – and he went to jail for taking money from his clients' account, so you can imagine the level of integrity of the others," Charles recalls.

commands which the game would understand. This section had been born out of a desire by Charles' 19-year-old self to pander to gamers who got frustrated when the game didn't understand the text that they had entered. "Some gamers would start typing expletives when the parser didn't understand the words that they had entered, so I thought it might be a nice idea for players to get a response in *Ship Of Doom*," explains Charles. "In hindsight, it was very puerile".

Richard was unconcerned. "I told my mum not to worry," he says of the phone call. But the next day, at the bottom of page three, ironically enough, *The Sun* printed a damning report, complete with a quote from his mother who was Artic's office manager. "The headline was 'Computer Game Nasty Zapped By *The Sun*'", Richard laughs. The matter was even discussed in Parliament in relation to the Obscene Video Act



» [ZX Spectrum] *Engineer Humpty* starred the iconic wall-falling egg.

and computer games were almost dragged into the legislation that were applied to videos. "All of a sudden, our adventure games were being sent back from WHSmith and John Menzies," Richard says.

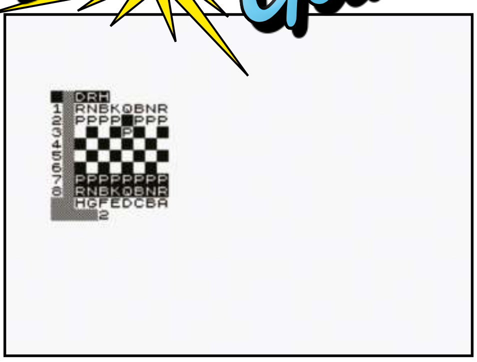
Although it makes for a good tale today (made lighter by a disgruntled couple who called Artic complaining that it had bought the game on the understanding it was naughty only to find it was a text adventure), the situation was potentially damaging. While market traders clamoured for *Ship Of Doom* following the furore ("We managed to sell them all," Richard affirms), it risked damaging Artic's solid reputation for publishing solid adventure games.

Thankfully, Artic's relationship with WHSmith and other high-street retailers was just as solid. Richard recalls the early days of buying a suit and skipping a lecture to go to the local branch of WHSmith in Hull. "I said to the manager, 'Look, we have these computer games, do you want to sell them?' and he agreed to take them on a sale or return basis," Richard says. But it proved to be something of a business lesson for him.

"I recall him asking if I was VAT-registered and him telling me I needed to be," Richard continues. "He then said the artwork for our games was rubbish and that we needed something a lot better. He put us in touch with someone to do that and the arrangement worked well." The idea was to place the cassettes in a heat-sealed bag and allow WHSmith to have 20 per cent of the game's price. "I got home and received a phone call to say all the games had sold and could he have 100 more," Richard says.

Revenues soared to some £150,000 within six months as the WHSmith deal saw the sale of about 50,000 games. Artic bought a one-to-one high-speed tape duplicator which would copy cassettes at ten

Defining Games



ZX Chess

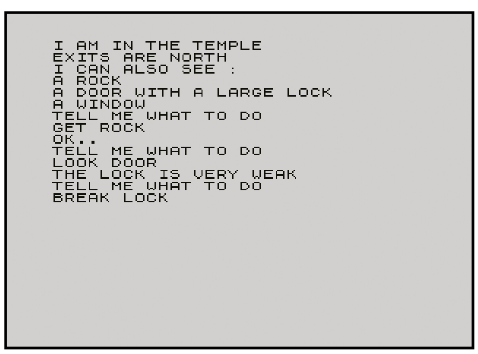
1981

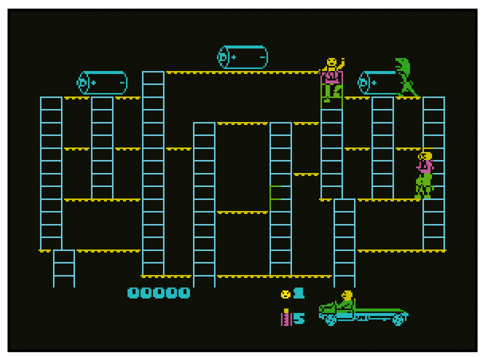
■ Artic made a name for itself by publishing a good number of chess games. *ZX Chess* by David Horne is arguably the greatest, primarily because it manages to use just 672 bytes of RAM. It's not a spot-on digital conversion of the ancient two-player strategy board game by any means (there's no castling, queening or en passant capture and it wasn't quite a chess expert). But when you consider that no other chess game managed to do so much with so little for 33 years (*BootChess* broke the record in 2015 with a game taking up 487 bytes), it really was some achievement.

Adventure B: Inca Curse

1982

■ Many adventure games were created by Artic Computing from *Adventure A: Planet of Death* in 1981 through to *Curse of the 7 Faces* and *Dead At The Controls* four years later. But we pull out *Inca Curse* for a reason: it was the first game ever created by Charles Cecil, who not only went on to produce *Ship Of Doom*, but founded Revolution Software which made classics such as *Beneath A Steel Sky* and *Broken Sword*. *Inca Curse* was a text-based title that pitched players as an explorer in the South American jungle, and, as you'd expect from a text adventure, it relied heavily on a gamer's imagination.





Bear Bovver

1983

■ Developed by Jon Ritman, the premise of *Bear Bovver* was similar to *BurgerTime* but that didn't make it any less imaginative. Put in control of Ted, the proud owner of a Sinclair electric truck, players had to leave a parked vehicle, navigate a building site's scaffolding and drop batteries one platform at a time into the vehicle. Once done, he could drive away, eventually reaching the next screen. Hindering Ted, however, were bears and a lizard, although dropping a battery on their heads bought players some time. It was certainly fun, helped along by smooth animation, frantic action and a level of difficulty that could make you scream.

> "All of a sudden, our adventure games were being sent back"
> RICHARD TURNER

times the normal rate, and Richard's father and sister would work late into the night creating dozens of copies. The mail order side of the Artic business was also performing fairly well. "But even then it wasn't a deliberate plan," Richard says.

"It was an opportunity and something we were interested in but it was still very much a cottage industry and we were all young people aged around 20 having a great time."

Up until 1982, adventures had made up the bulk of Artic's offerings and they were responsible for the company's great start. They revolved around the player entering a verb and a noun – such as 'Go North' or 'Get Gun'. "But they were also infamous for their bad spellings, like 'chizel', 'cant' (without an apostrophe) and many others, which Charles is also completely responsible for," laughs Richard, who is still very good friends with his former business partner.

Indeed, Charles recalls a man walking up to him at ZX Microfair and revealing he had managed to convince his wife to buy a ZX81 because it would help educate their son. "He said the spelling was so bad that she was beginning to become suspicious," Charles laughs. But Charles was a great asset. "He wrote many of those early adventures, drawing out a big plan of rooms including what would be in them and how the objects would interact and so on," says Richard. "He and I had quite good imaginations so we came up with some nice stories. We also had a love of puzzles and we liked stuff that you had to figure out. That was of more interest to us at the time than arcade games – which I wasn't that good at anyway."

Other adventures followed over the next few years including *Adventure D: Espionage Island* in 1982, *Adventure E: The Golden Apple* in 1983, and both *Adventure F: The Eye of Bain* and *Adventure G: Ground Zero* in 1984. *Adventure H: Robin Hood* was released in 1985 as part of a compilation. The idea was that they formed a collectible series. "A, B, C, D and so on," says Richard, explaining. "They were all cleverly labelled, weren't they? When they started being sold in the shops, though, we had to give them more imaginative names which is why we came up with *Inca Curse*, *Ground Zero* and so on."

By 1983, Artic Computing was based in an office in Brandesburton, a village in the East Riding



» An early Artic advert featuring a range of different games and utilities, complete with an older iteration of the company's logo.

Timeline

1980

■ Richard Turner and Chris Thornton set up Artic Computing.

■ ***Sword Of Peace* becomes the company's first release for the ZX80 and ZX81.**

■ The company makes a paltry £50 in its first six months of trading.

1981

■ **Richard meets Charles Cecil at the motor company, Ford HQ and persuades him to write a game.**

■ David Horne spends a year writing the first chess game for the ZX81, *ZX Chess*, using just 1K of memory.

■ ***Adventure A: Planet Of Death* is released, cementing the foundations for Artic's future text adventures.**

■ Charles Cecil's *Adventure B: Inca Curse* marks his videogame debut.

1982

■ **Jon Ritman releases his first game via Artic: *Namtir Racers*.**

■ Charles' second game, *Adventure C: Ship Of Doom*, attracts controversy.

1983

■ **Artic releases a large number of games as it builds up its catalogue.**

■ The company now has six full-time programmers and Michael Hunt becomes the general manager.

■ **Jon Ritman's *Bear Bovver* is released on the ZX Spectrum.**

■ Artic moves offices from Hull to Brandesburton in Yorkshire.

1984

■ **Chris leaves Artic and founds his own company, Kerian UK.**

■ Games including *Mutant Monty*, the *Humpty Dumpty* titles, and adventures incorporating graphics are released.

1985

■ **A budget label, Antartic is launched to help pull in more revenue.**

■ Money troubles hit as larger companies place a stronger grip on the market.

1986

■ **Charles Cecil leaves to form Paragon Programming.**

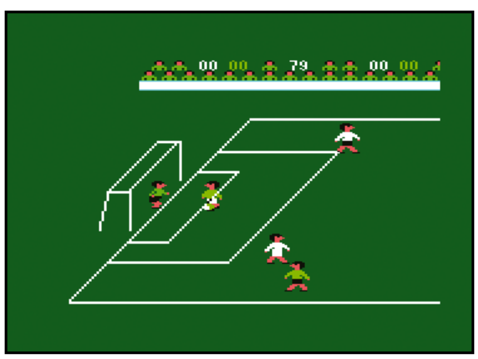
■ Artic stops releasing its games and closes its doors.

Paws

1985

■ Artic originally intended to tie this game in with Andrew Lloyd Webber's musical *Cats* but, after failing to secure the licence, it was released as *Paws* instead. This caused some embarrassment for *Sinclair User* magazine which reviewed the unfinished game as *Cats* in its June 1985 issue, only to clear up the mistake three months later. It also switched from thinking it was too easy to believing it to be challenging. The premise involved moving a mother cat around a maze to collect her lost kittens while avoiding bully dogs and while it wasn't purrfect (sorry!), it was colourful, well animated and it kept you on your toes.





World Cup Carnival

1986

■ If this was a real game of football, then it would be a true own-goal. It all started when two US Gold staff members got into a muddle over who was supposed to be developing a football game in time for the World Cup. Realising no one was creating it, the Birmingham-based publisher approached Ocean in the hope of modifying *Match Day* but a break down in communication scuppered such plans. Instead, it dusted off Artic's two-year-old *World Cup Football*, doing nothing to rectify the jerky scrolling, poor graphics and terrible rendition of the beautiful game. Everyone cried rip-off and it missed the World Cup anyway.



» This early catalogue highlights a range of games, including Jon Ritman's *Bear Bovver*.



Arcade Games

BEAR BOVVER
Ted is the proud owner of a new Sinclair Electric Truck. All was going well until one day, Ted notices his truck slowing down, "Oh dear" thinks Ted, "these batteries don't last long". He takes a long look around, suddenly he notices something glint in the sunshine at the top of a nearby renovated building. Batteries! Ted jumps out of his car and climbs the nearest ladder - at this point he realises that he is not alone!
SPECTRUM 48K ACS 086
COMMODORE 64 ACC 094

MONKEY BUZINESS
Kong has kidnapped your girlfriend and you want her back! He is hiding her at the top of a renovated building. You have to climb a series of ladders avoiding the barrels which Kong is throwing down. Your only protection against the barrels are a number of umbrellas which allow you to float down from one floor to the next and some hammers to crush the barrels with. You reacha the top of the building reach out your hand to grab her - then Kong takes her and jumps onto the next building, once again you have a similar task ahead of you.
SPECTRUM 48K ACS 085

…NG'S LOOPY LAUNDRY
…direct Mr. Wong around his laundry from floor to floor and … clothing one at a time. Once you have collected an item of … ou then have to take it to the … and drop it down the laundry … beware - there are vicious … nasty soap suds out to get you! … protection is a packet of starch … only stops them temporarily!
…RUM 16/48K ACS 093

DIMENSION DESTRUCTORS ACS 058
Whilst on a mission to explore the unknown territories of the Galaxy, you encounter an alien force. You are too far from home to run away and hide, your only choice is to fight it out. In the distance, a mass of small spots appear, the dots grow larger until you can clearly see them - it is an alien space ship in true 3D form. Time now to fight for your life!
SPECTRUM 48K

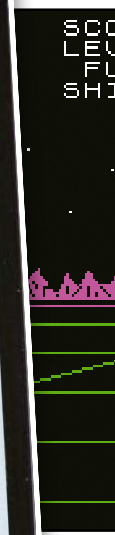
Arcade Games

BUG BLASTER
Bugs are descending towards you winding their way through the mushrooms. You must protect yourself with a Laser Base. But beware of the nasty insects who are out to get you.
VIC 20 UNEXPANDED ACV 104

MOTHERSHIP
The Mothership sends drone ships down the zarway to attack and destroy you. You must destroy them first to gain access to the Mothership. Once inside you must make your wayo to the control pad on the top level to gain control. You are then able to direct Mothership to homebase where you must break through the barrier of energy pads to destroy the planet generators.
SPECTRUM 48K ACS 107
COMMODORE 64 ACC 082

EARTH DEFENCE
You are in control of three laser bases. Your mission is to defend the earth from alien invasion. Line your crosshair sight up on the on-coming missiles or bombs and fire your laser. You only have a limited amount of laser strength and time to defend the earth. For each wave of missile and bombs destroyed, the next is more difficult.
SPECTRUM 16/48K ACS 057

DANCING FEATS
Become a musician in a matter of seconds. With the aid of your '64 and a Joystick it is possible to play music in various styles accompanied by a splendid display of coloured bars that match the notes. A menu option allows you to choose the bass, beat, style, tempo and on an ending for your masterpieces.
ACC 083 **COMMODORE 64**



Where Are They Now?

Richard Turner



As Artic Computing began to fade towards the end of the Eighties, Richard opened a computer store in Hull with someone who ran a few video shops. But when sales began to fall, it was turned into a shop selling kitchens and Richard asked his technical staff to program kitchen design software. This was hugely successful and the venture became known as ArtiCAD. It is now one of the leading design and sales products in the kitchen and bath business. While Richard did once consider creating games for smartphones, ArtiCAD currently occupies the bulk of his time.

Charles Cecil



Charles became a director of Artic Computing in 1985 but he formed Paragon Programming a year later and ended up working so closely with US Gold, that he eventually left development and became the Birmingham-based publisher's software development manager. His career continued to soar when he headed Activision's European development studio but it was his decision to found Revolution Software in 1990 with Tony Warriner, David Sykes and his future wife Noirin Carmody that shaped his future. Sticking to his adventure gaming roots, he oversaw the creation of *Lure of the Temptress*, scripted *Beneath A Steel Sky* and developed the *Broken Sword* series which continues to be popular.

Jon Ritman



Having had a successful grounding in the videogame industry with Artic, Jon made his name with Ocean Software, writing the *Match Day* series, *Head Over Heels* and *Batman*. He went on to work with Rare on the isometric adventure *Monster Max* for the Game Boy and he set up Cranberry Source with John Cook, creating *Super Match Soccer*. Later, he worked with Geoff Crammond on unreleased ports of *Grand Prix 3* and his place in UK videogaming history was covered in the 2014 documentary, *From Bedroom To Billions*.

> "All of a sudden the bottom dropped out of the market for us"
> RICHARD TURNER

of Yorkshire. Although all of Artic's games had been created for Sinclair's machines, the team was also creating titles for other 8-bit systems, notably the Commodore 64 and Amstrad CPC. Artic had also begun taking games from freelance developers and it had fostered a flourishing relationship with up-and-coming programmer Jon Ritman.

"I was working at Radio Rentals when I first bought a ZX81 and I taught myself to program," says Jon. "About three months later I had finished *Namtir Raiders* and sent it off to a few companies that advertised games in the magazines. I got an almost immediate response from Artic offering what I later recognised as far too little for it. But, like the naive fool I was then, I was so pleased to have been offered anything and accepted." The game was a fixed-screen shoot-'em-up that could be played on a ZX81 with a 16K RAM pack and it was based on what he could remember from a coin-op game he'd seen in a pub.

"It was only at an exhibition that Jon told us the name of the game was Ritman backwards – none of us had actually realised it," Richard says. Artic then bought Jon a Spectrum on which he produced an unreleased clone of *Space Invaders*. "At around this time I spoke with Richard about quitting work and going full-time and my biggest worry was that my car was supplied by Radio Rentals," says Jon. "Richard supplied a car and I quit my job." Jon worked on an *Asteroids* clone called *Cosmic Debris* and the tank hunting game, *3D Combat Zone* for the ZX Spectrum which was a clone of *Battlezone* and made use of 3D wireframe technology.

He also created another 3D game called *Dimension Destructors* but arguably his best game for Artic was the addictive single-player scaffold-climbing platformer *Bear Bovver*. "It was my favourite because it was just very, very good," says Richard. For Jon, the job was easy. There were no discussions and he simply wrote what he felt like. "Only when *Bear Bovver* was being finished did I talk to them about improving their advertising because previous attempts had been simply a photo of the cassettes for all the games they published," Jon says. "I commissioned a bit of cover art and got Artic to do A4 adverts of that art with no text initially to create a questioning public following up with the same picture with the appropriate text. It might have worked well, but Artic failed to get the game in the shops to coincide with the second wave of adverts."

Although he had discussed the possibility of making a football game with Chris Clarke, a founding member of Crystal Computing who had joined Artic to work on the business side of gaming, Jon moved to Ocean Software. But Artic was, by now, in a good position, taking on new staff and growing. At the beginning of 1983, Sinclair Research had taken *Planet Of Death*, *Inca Curse*, *Ship Of Doom* and *Espionage Island* under its own wing and Artic was building up a huge library. By September 1983, it had taken its range to 62 titles with the likes of *Chess II*, *Jigsaw*, *Raider*, *3D Quadracube*, *Road Racers* and *Snake* being released within a staggering batch of 21 games. A deal was also struck with Arnold Wheaton Software to become its sole distributor.

Compared to some other companies, though, there was a feeling that Artic was being left behind. While Jon Ritman went on to create the seminal *Match Day* for Ocean, Artic ended up with *World Cup Football*. It wasn't a particularly good game, in the critical sense – indeed, Jon had pointed to Artic's rendition at a computer show at Alexandria Palace while he was chatting to Ocean boss David Ward and declared that his own soccer title would be "loads better" – so while it did become Artic's bestselling game of all time, the reviews stung.



» [ZX Spectrum] *Mothership* was a decent shooter that was heavily inspired by the likes of *Star Wars*. Check out the obvious TIE fighter in the left advert.

Even so, Artic was far from dead. Its trio of *Humpty Dumpty* titles for the Speccy and C64 traded on a recognised character and they were simple, challenging and lots of fun once players got the hang of the controls. *Mutant Monty* was a decent riff on the *Miner Willy* style of platformer and there were similar games that at least had interesting titles – albeit of a type that may raise eyebrows today: we're looking at you, *Mr Wong's Loopy Laundry*. Third-party developers working for Artic were happy enough, typically picking up between £5,000 to £10,000 per quarter. "But Ocean and the likes were employing large numbers of people to create games and distribution companies were doing better than us in getting titles into the stores," says Richard. "The shops wanted to buy from a wholesaler and deal with one source and that made sense."

In Artic's favour was a working environment that was low on overheads. There was a major blow out on a TV advert – "that was a huge blunder but an ad agency convinced me to spend £120,000 on it and it was performing so poorly for us that we had to pull it," says Richard – but generally it was a case of paying 20 per cent to the developer and having a small admin team to sort faulty tapes and answer the phone. "When you're selling 50,000 football games at £3, it's pretty much all profit," Richard adds.

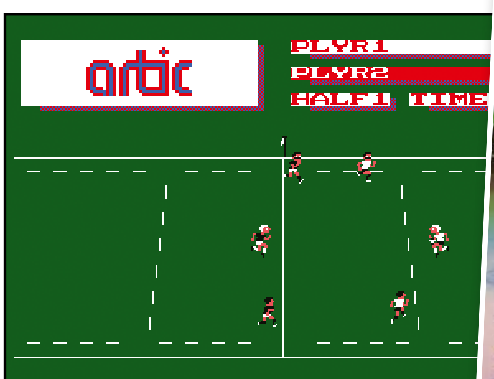
In 1985, Artic's marketing director Jeff Raggett announced that it was slashing the price of its adventures, bringing them down to £1.99. It also looked to make the adventures more appealing which is why *Robin Hood* (created using *The Quill* adventure creator just as *Ground Zero* was) was cut from 100 text-only locations to 40 with graphics. At the same time a deal was struck with Imperial Software. "Anything that does not follow our normal theme will be released through Imperial," Jeff told *Micro Adventure* magazine.

One game that didn't get a price cut was *World Cup Football* but, in 1986, it did end up being repurposed. US Gold had won the rights to publish a football game to coincide with the World Cup in Mexico that Summer but its development slipped, and it realised that it might miss the window. To avoid releasing late or not at all, US Gold snapped up the licence to Artic's *World Cup Football*, added a poor training mode, popped posters and a badge into the package and whacked it out as *World Cup Carnival* for £9.95 – £2 more than the original. Critics went ballistic – *Amstrad Action* gave it 0% – and Artic got much of the flack. US Gold, meanwhile, went on to secure *FIFA*'s official licence for Italy 1990 and USA 1994.

"Yes, it was controversial and Charles shouldered the blame," laughs Richard, throwing his friend under the bus. But it wasn't the end. In July 1986, having released games such as *Paws*, *Web War*, *International Rugby* and *Aladdin's Cave* the previous year, it started its own budget label called Antartic, selling games for £2.99 at a time when other companies, including US Gold, Firebird and Interceptor were going down the same path. These games included the platform shooter *The Master For The Spectrum*, *Woks* and a *Hunchback* clone called *The Great Wall* for the Acorn Electron and BBC Micro.

But then things fizzled. "All of a sudden the bottom dropped out of the market for us," says Richard. "Hundreds of software companies were being consolidated and the likes of Centresoft were dominating distribution. In moving from full price to budget and in concentrating on compilations, we found fewer people wanting to write games for us – they wanted to create for the big boys, quite understandably. We could tell the company was on its way out and let it go. The fun times of the games industry, for me at least, had come to an end." *





» [Amstrad CPC] *International Rugby* was an early adaptation of the sport and was a better effort than Artic's miserable football game.

The DNA of Artic Computing

Interactive fiction

You can't really discuss Artic without mentioning its adventures: they were a key part of its identity. Entirely text-based for the first five titles, they used the same game engine and command set but graphics were introduced to represent rooms when *Eye Of Bain* was released in 1984. *The Quill* adventure creator was also used for later games.



8-bit computers

Since Artic existed during the Eighties and never made it beyond, it only managed to publish games for the 8-bit home computers. The ZX81 and Spectrum became its primary market although there were some exclusives for other platforms such as *Voodoo Rage* on the Amstrad CPC. This poor game was released on the £1.99 budget label, Antartic, in the Summer of 1986.

Controversies

Given Artic Computing wasn't around that long, it found itself in trouble a few times. *Ship Of Doom* was pulled from shop shelves for allegedly being X-rated and it all kicked off over *World Cup Football* when US Gold got it mitts on the game. It was also called out for not replying to gamer requests for Help sheets, although that was relatively minor.

Prolific development

At the tail end of 1983, Artic released a staggering 21 programs, 15 of which were for the Spectrum and ZX81, taking the catalogue to 62. They hit an assortment of markets, putting out a range of educational tapes called Vocabulary Tutors, for instance, but there were more than enough games. *Road Racers*, *Alpha Probe*, *Snake* and *St Andrews* were among them.

Talented developers

Richard freely admits that the lack of business experience meant Artic made mistakes. "We were making it up as we went along," he tells us. But they were early days for home computing and Artic's inexperience allowed young talent to experiment and flourish. David Horne pulled a blinder with ZX Chess while Artic introduced Jon Ritman and Charles Cecil to gamers.

Lots of money

When Home Computing Weekly mentioned the type of car offered to Image Software's wizkid Eugene Evans (who had yet to take his test), Artic's general manager Michael Hunt wrote a tongue-in-cheek letter published on 7 June 1983. It said its six full-time coders had Raleigh Super Sport Racer bikes and that Richard had an Aston Martin Lagonda. Chris Thornton had a Lamborghini Countach LP500S.



Hardware Heaven

EDITOR'S CHOICE Night Stalker

This is amongst the most highly regarded of the Intellivision originals, and it's easy to see why. *Night Stalker* casts you as a man trapped in a deadly labyrinth filled with bats, spiders and deadly robots, with the goal of amassing as many points as possible by shooting these enemies. It's not an easy task, though – you're not armed to begin with and each gun you collect only holds six shots, so you frequently flip roles, playing both hunter and hunted. It's simple, but tension increases greatly as the game progresses thanks to the introduction of smarter and tougher robots.





Intellivision

» **MANUFACTURER:** Mattel Electronics » **YEAR:** 1979 » **COST:** £199 (launch), £25+ (today)

When the toy giant Mattel decided to investigate the possibility for a home videogames console in 1977, it was looking at new ground that nevertheless had a big flag already planted on it. The arcade colossus Atari was getting ready to launch its 2600 console, and although Mattel had identified a suitable product from General Instruments (the Gimini 6900) that it could base its own console on, the company decided that it would instead focus on handheld games. These sold well and established the Mattel Electronics brand, to the point that by 1979 the company had mustered the will to take on Atari. A team of engineers headed by Dave Chandler then worked to build the final Intellivision hardware for a test launch later that year.

The console itself would fit into any late Seventies living room thanks to its mixture of gold and woodgrain panels. The gold carries over to the two built-in controllers, each of which includes a directional disc and number pad, with a slot for game-specific overlays. This classic design would be abandoned in favour of the significantly uglier Intellivision II prior to the videogame market crash in 1983, but later formed the basis of INTV Corporation's INTV System III. *



Intellivision fact

■ Although it's still a digital controller, the directional disc on the Intellivision controller recognises 16 distinct directions – twice as many as a regular joystick.

RAM: 524B MAIN MEMORY, 932B GRAPHICS MEMORY
PROCESSOR: GENERAL INSTRUMENTS CP1610 16-BIT CPU (894.886 KHZ)
GRAPHICS: STANDARD TELEVISION INTERFACE CHIP (GENERAL INSTRUMENTS AY-3-8900-1)
AUDIO: GENERAL INSTRUMENTS AY-3-8914 (THREE-CHANNEL MONO)
MEDIA: ROM CARTRIDGE

LEGENDARY WARRIOR RYGAR

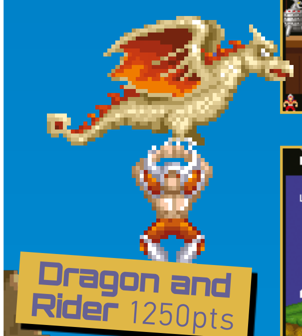
4.5 billion years have passed since Earth's creation and the Dominators have ruled throughout. Now, an evil Dominator has taken over causing dead legend Rygar to rise from the grave – LET'S FIGHT!







» [Arcade] The caves of round 23, and a sadly deceased woolly mammoth watches over Rygar's progress.





Despite being one of the oldest arcade machine companies, Tecmo (first known as Tehkan) never quite – in the west, at least – gained the status of peers such as Capcom or Taito. Tecmo's arcade games, however, were often novel in their approach, as demonstrated by the explosive collect-'em-up *Bomb Jack*, puzzler *Solomon's Key* and this fantasy-themed hack-and-slasher that charged into arcades in the mid-Eighties. Housed in a standard cabinet, *Rygar* utilises an eight-way joystick with two buttons, for jump and fire. While being a one-player game, Tecmo introduced an option whereupon a second player could start a game while another player was already playing, regardless of the progress already made. A continue option could also be employed, although even this is removed from level 20 onwards. By then, the player must have acquired the necessary skills to progress further – or fail in their mission.

And here is that mission. Known as *Argus No Senshi* (*Warrior Of Argus*) in Japan, *Rygar* is the story of the eponymous hero, resurrected in order to defeat an ancient evil. In what would appear to be some sort of parallel universe, the Earth is ruled by the 'Dominators', before the mere passage of time briefly extinguishes their reign. Alas, now there's a new Dominator on the scene and the people, having got used to their new-found freedom, are apparently reluctant to accept its command. The solution, naturally, is to send one man to defeat all of the Dominator's minions and free the planet once more. Is it Earth? Or is it Argus? And when does it actually take place? None of this is made entirely clear by the original arcade game, yet one thing is for sure: there's a bad guy at the end, and a host of enemies to eliminate before you get to him.



» [Arcade] Dawdle for too long and the background turns black and this grotesque creature pursues Rygar.



Fortunately, Rygar is armed with a mythical razor-sharp spinning disc known as the Diskarmor. Our hero can launch this weapon horizontally in the direction he is facing, or spin it 360 degrees around himself, and either way it proves quite useful at slicing through his enemies. Also throughout the game, headstones appear from the ground, and if smashed these reveal shield power-ups and score bonuses. The latter includes a 'stacking' bonus that yields 70,000 points if seven are collected without losing a life, while the former includes five different hidden upgrades. Three of these are related to the Diskarmor: the star shield increases its range, the crown enhances its power (multiple enemies can be despatched with one throw) and the sun icon gives Rygar better vertical control of his weapon, especially useful for taking out the flying enemies that pepper the game. The tiger power-up enables Rygar to kill the enemies he jumps on, while the invaluable cross symbol gives him invincibility for a predetermined time.

While its plot and format may be stereotypical, there's plenty of fun to be had in *Rygar*'s fast-paced gameplay. The game has an extraordinary amount of levels – 27 – and each one of them is unusually short, with progress displayed on a mini-map in the bottom-right-hand corner. That's not to say *Rygar* is an easy game. After the primer of the first couple of levels, the player is soon besieged by all manner of the evil Dominator's minions, and one touch from any of them causes the loss of a life. Fortunately, following in ▶





PLAYING TIPS



PATTERNS OF ATTACK

■ Most of the enemies have no ranged weapons and rely on their melee attacks. Progressing any reasonable distance in the game involves studying which method of defending each enemy is best. For example, the baby rhinos require a crouch attack, while the mutant tribesmen require you to hang back and wait.

CIRCLE OF BLADE



■ Opinion is split as to whether Rygar's circle attack is actually any use. While it can be helpful in clearing multiple threatening enemies, it has to be timed well or else they will slip through its swing. The sun power-up makes it more useful in that those pesky flying creatures can be despatched more easily.

ROCKY BONUSES



■ The many headstones in Rygar hide either bonus point items (nice) or power-ups (even nicer). The latter are not as common, so it pays to watch behind Rygar for stones that pop up in his wake, as he can backtrack through a level. Collect seven stars and receive a nice 70,000 point bonus for your effort.

JUMP LIKE A PLUMBER

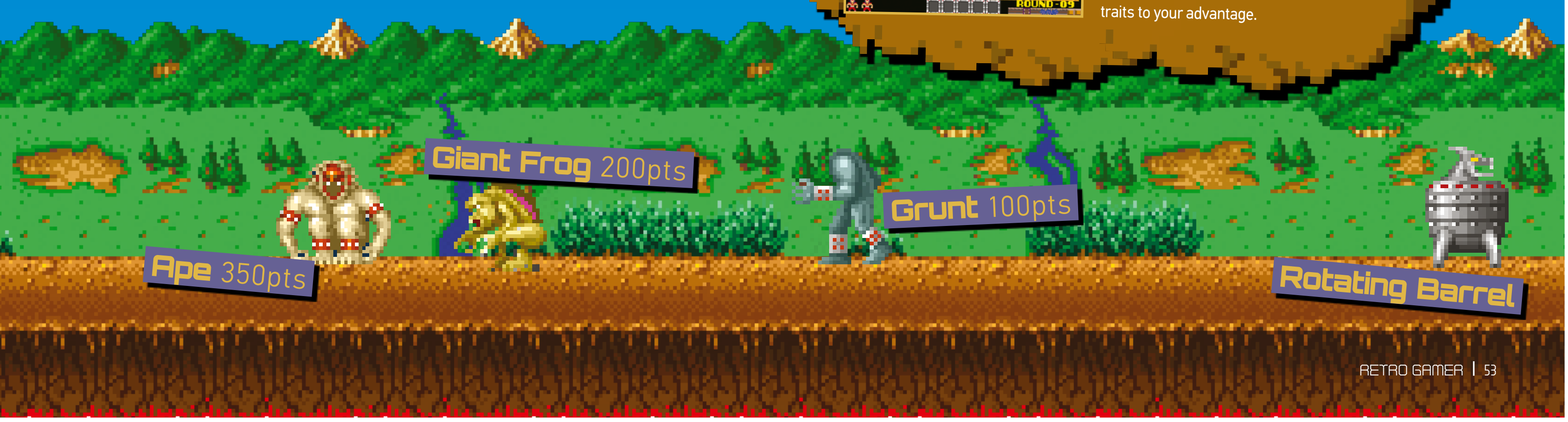


■ Rygar's ability to stun enemies by jumping on them is a novel one for this type of game – and welcome, too. The victim may only be temporarily incapacitated, but that invariably gives our hero enough time to scamper past to safety. The tiger power-up helps even more, as the jump then kills enemies.

AGILITY PLUS



■ Rygar is a mobile chap. Not only can he climb ropes with ease, but he can also cause them to sway horizontally, helping him slay nearby enemies. He also has great agility when jumping and can glide left or right while firing his Diskarmor. Make sure to use these traits to your advantage.



CONVERSION CAPERS



AMSTRAD CPC

■ This port looks good, with the headless grunts and flying enemies particularly impressive. Compared to its fellow Z80 port, however, it's slow, and contains iffy collision detection. It has the same issue as the other home versions in that Rygar's movement while jumping is vastly restricted when using the Diskarmor.

COMMODORE 64



■ Vapid backgrounds and a difficulty curve that makes the original play like a stroll through the park result in probably the weakest of the 8-bit home conversions in terms of actual quality. It moves at a decent pace, however, and Rygar himself aside, boasts some impressive looking sprites.



LYNX

■ Although its box art echoes the NES version, this port imitates the arcade original, and is an excellent game, too, despite only having 23 rounds. While the screen is predictably a little cramped, Lynx *Rygar* is superbly balanced, easy to control and looks beautiful. An essential game for owners of the Atari handheld.

MASTER SYSTEM



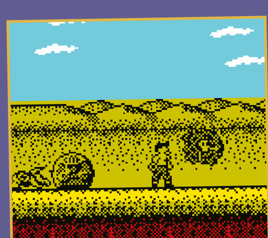
■ Released in Japan under the name *Argus No Juujiken (Crossed Sword Of Argus)*, this is a bare-bones version of *Rygar*, divested of many of the original's beautiful landscapes. The headstones are gone, too, replaced by bizarre flying bonuses, but it's a decent game despite being a little too frustrating at times.



NES

■ The NES game is quite different from the original in that it transforms Rygar into a *Zelda*-lite RPG, coupling the familiar side-scrolling view with overhead levels, experience, magic spells and useable items. A nice idea, but its graphics let it down a touch, with an unfortunate flicker. Still, it has a very welcome life bar, though.

ZX SPECTRUM



■ While it may lack graphically and sonically, the Spectrum version manages to move along at a respectable speed, making it fun to play, if only for a short time due to its lack of graphical variation. An unfortunate problem is that Rygar's movement is restricted while jumping and firing, but it's a fine conversion.





» [Arcade] There's no doubt Rygar contains several beautiful backdrops.







▶ the footsteps of a certain Italian plumber, Rygar can jump on enemies and temporarily stun them; obtaining the tiger shield puts even more power in the sole of this warrior's boots as enemies are destroyed by his lethal stomp.

Most of *Rygar*'s many levels are a picture of a leafy green paradise, a beautiful land that certainly looks worth fighting for. Rocky outcrops must be hauled over; tree branches jumped on. By round four, Rygar is fighting enemies with a picturesque sunset overlooking the extreme violence. There's a deserted village, a gushing set of rapids and gloomy caves for the warrior to stride through, before he reaches his ultimate goal: the palace of the evil Dominator. Throughout the game, should Rygar hesitate too long, the timer runs out, the background turns black and death itself, represented as a lava-fuelled globby *thing*, relentlessly chases our hero around the screen. One touch and it's, well, death. The diversity of minions echoes the evil Dominator's tendrils that have insinuated into Rygar's home world. Giant apes sit on trees and hurl missiles; mutated tribesmen hurl themselves at him; even the wildlife, including squirrels and worms have been possessed and have just one thing in mind.





» [Arcade] Falling into the rapids means instant death. No bronze swimming certificate for Rygar!



Points are awarded for killing all of the Dominator's minions, and Rygar also has an array of score bonuses, making it an attractive prospect for score-attack players. After the player has acquired several powers, shield icons will often appear from crumbled headstones, and these also yield an instant 1,000 points. End-of-level bonuses are based on the number of enemies Rygar has sliced up (a 'repulse' bonus), plus a special rank score based on Rygar's total kills, and also for any time left over – preserving each life therefore becomes vital for anyone going for that big score. But best of all, hidden away on level 13 is a secret parchment. Find this and an amazing 1 million points is yours to behold.

By the mid-latter Eighties, the licensing of arcade machines for home computers was so rampant that even a relatively obscure game such as *Rygar* was ripe for the conversion treatment. US Gold acquired the rights together with fellow Tecmo game, *Solomon's Key*, and handed the job to its developer, Probe Software. Tecmo itself released the NES version and, while retaining the basic plot, this differed from the arcade game, adding RPG elements, no doubt in an attempt to replicate the success of Nintendo games, such as *Zelda*. The NES's rival, the Sega Master System, received a straighter port, which was only released in Japan.

It may not be the most famous or complex of games, yet *Rygar* touched the conciousness of gamers in the mid-Eighties, no doubt encouraged by the fresh interest in fantasy-themed IP such as *Conan The Barbarian* and *Dungeons & Dragons*. As such, it deserves its place in arcade history, if nothing else for the sleek and deadly weapon that its hero wields: the razor-sharp Diskarmor. ✱

CONVERTING RYGAR

We talk to Antony Hartley, the man behind the CPC and Spectrum ports



The ZX Spectrum and Amstrad conversions were done by Probe for US Gold?
Yep, I was a subcontractor. Actually, I wrote and ported 25 games, including the arcade games *Quartet* and *Video Poker*, all on Amstrad and Spectrum, sometimes on other platforms.

Who else was involved with *Rygar*?
The initial artwork wasn't looking too good, so Nick Bruty stepped in to help out.

Were you familiar with the Rygar arcade game and how did you get on converting it?
Yes, very, and we had our own machine, sent to us by Tecmo. I also had the source code and graphics, which was very helpful. It was an okay game, it played quite well, but it wasn't the most complex of arcade games. But it wasn't easy to convert and there were severe memory limitations, particularly on the Spectrum. I used a lot of memory to make the game quicker, such as prerotated sprites and mask tables. There were quite a few enemies missing, and some levels, too. And of course, the beautiful backdrops sadly had to go.

How long did it take to code both versions?
In total about five months for the two versions, 100 per cent assembly language, written on the PDS development system. I also wrote all the game editors, and Dave Whittaker did the music for both versions.

Were there any big issues during development?
Memory was always a big problem, and I had a peculiar bug at the end that took two weeks to fix. It was always tough work, but I loved it – and I learned how to use prerotated sprites!





THE HISTORY OF Ys

With 30 years of history behind it, Ys is an elder statesman of the Japanese RPG scene – but it's not nearly as well known as some of its contemporaries. Nick Thorpe speaks to Falcom president Toshihiro Kondo to discover its complete history...

We occasionally have a problem with RPGs here on Retro Gamer, and we're sure many of our readers can relate to it. As adults, sometimes it's just hard to juggle work, life and the latest epic adventure. We don't want to avoid them, but we do sometimes find ourselves wondering if we'll see them through to the end, such is the trend towards large and complex games in the genre. Thankfully, we're not the only ones who have struggled like this, and it's not a new problem – and that's why Nihon Falcom chose to develop *Ys*, a different kind of RPG.

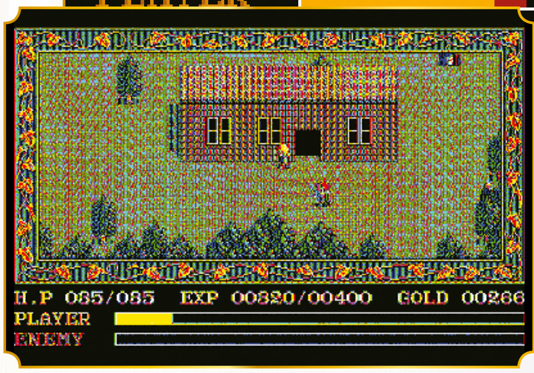
Falcom had already had a major RPG hit in Japan in 1984 with *Dragon Slayer*, an action RPG for a variety of Japanese computer systems. The following years saw the company follow up with *Dragon Slayer II: Xanadu*, *Xanadu Scenario II: The Resurrection Of Dragon* and *Dragon Slayer Jr: Romancia*. *Romancia* is particularly interesting, as it was an attempt at simplifying the genre, featuring just one attack button, no customisation and very few statistics.

This philosophy of simplifying the RPG carried forward to *Ys*. In an interview for the book *Challenge!! Personal Computer AVG & RPG III*, programmer Masaya Hashimoto explained that *Ys* was created with a desire to make an accessible game that wasn't aimed at hardcore RPG fans. There was a conscious effort to avoid lengthy level grinding processes, and players were allowed to save anywhere to avoid losing progress. However, the biggest simplification was the use of the 'bump' combat system. When playing *Ys*, you never need to hit an attack button – you simply run your character into an enemy to deal damage, preferably slightly to the left or right rather than head-on.

The bump system was a huge key to the early appeal of the series, as we're told by Falcom president Toshihiro Kondo. "You can blow through enemies really quickly, and it's really fun," he begins. "Practically







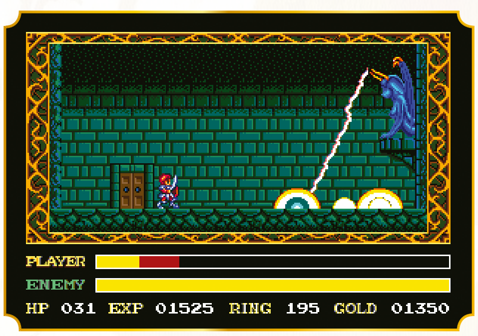
» [PC-8801] *Ys* took advantage of the high-resolution modes of early Japanese computers to simulate a high colour palette.

everybody who plays the game brings that up and says how much fun it is to blast through enemies. The people who came before me at Falcom told me, when I first started working on the *Ys* games, 'You know the feeling of popping bubble wrap? It feels really good and you can't stop. That's the way *Ys* should be.'" Indeed, that's a lot of what players will do until they discover the main thrust of the game – guiding hero Adol Christin to gather the six books of *Ys*, following a doomsday prophecy from Esteria's local seer, Sara.

Of course, the team also had challenges to contend with. One of the biggest was the small size of the characters – Hashimoto found that he was unable to enhance storytelling with the use of facial expressions and designer Ayano Koshiro had wanted to make them larger, but it wasn't possible within the framework that had been built. Map design also proved problematic, as the perspective that had been adopted meant that it was impossible to display doors leading to the east or west. Somehow, all of these were overcome and the game was completed in just five months.

Ys: Ancient Ys Vanished launched for the NEC PC-8801 in June 1987, and ports for other popular Japanese computers followed throughout 1987. The game was a hit and made its way to the Famicom and Sega Mark III in 1988, and the latter version was translated for English-speaking Master System owners, giving *Ys* its first exposure outside of Japan. The game then appeared on computers in North America thanks to the Kyodai publishing partnership. Critical reception was positive – *Computer & Video Games* awarded the Master System version 92%, with Julian Rignall describing it as "massive and thoroughly engrossing," while *The Games Machine* compared it favourably to *The Legend Of Zelda* in a 90% review.

Ys II quickly followed in 1988, and was a direct sequel to the first game which used much of the same technology, though it did offer improved graphics. The plot followed immediately from the ending of the original game and followed Adol's journey to the floating land of Ys. The big change in this game was the addition of a magic system, with a number of spells available including a fire spell which was essential to defeating most bosses. Despite the critical acclaim received by the first game, *Ys II: Ancient Ys Vanished – The Final Chapter* didn't receive an international release in its standalone form. It was instead introduced to English-speaking audiences as part of the PC Engine game *Ys I & II*, a key driver of Turbografx CD sales in North America and the first release to adopt the now-common practice of combining the first two *Ys* games. The two games are now so closely linked that they even placed as a single entry in Famitsu readers' top 100 games ranking in 2006.



» [PC Engine] *Ys III: Wanderers From Ys* switched to the side-scrolling perspective you see here, and brought more complex combat with it.

WHO IS ADOL CHRISTIN?

Toshihiro Kondo explains how Falcom develops the hero at the heart of Ys

The first rule of writing for Adol Christin is that you don't write for Adol Christin. The character has a number of key traits – his red hair, his friendship with Dogi, and his terrible luck with boats – but the most important one is that he doesn't speak – and that's a conscious choice. "Just so you know, within the company there have been many times when people have said, 'Let's drop this and have him talk,'" says Kondo. "When I first started taking over the *Ys* series, what I was told is that the reason Adol doesn't speak is because he is an avatar for the player. The instant Adol talks, the player takes on a very passive role because the player is essentially being spoken to."

"The difficult part is that we don't necessarily know who Adol is either," Kondo continues. Where the creators behind other such long-lived characters might have a wealth of dialogue to refer to when looking to confirm a character's values or motivations, Falcom has no such luxury. "Sometimes when we're creating the game we have to think "what *is* he thinking?" or "how *would* he respond to this situation?" because we don't necessarily know." However, there are some basic traits that Adol has – or at least, that he's expected to have. "Even though Adol might not speak, he definitely has a personality or characteristics that make him Adol," Kondo confirms. "For one thing, we know that he's a nice person. We know that he has pretty good luck with the ladies, as it were! But the interesting thing about these characteristics is that they're things that the fans have attributed to Adol, not something that Falcom put into him."

As a result, Adol's character is something of a collaborative work – even though his portrayals all come from a single source, he's subject to many interpretations. "Something I often say about the character of Adol is that he's similar to historical public domain characters," Kondo muses, "in that there's these characters that exist in history that we look at from our perspective and have an idea of who they were and what they did, that might be at odds with what actually happened from a historical perspective. Adol is similar to that in that people have attributed things to Adol that might not necessarily have happened or been intended. That's a really special thing – not every character is able to have that kind of background."

TRANSLATING THE BOOK OF YS

Let's take a look at the many formats that the first book of Ys was translated for...



NEC PC-8801 1987

■ This is the original version of *Ys*, and the one most other Japanese computer versions are based on. The game makes use of a high-resolution 640x200 screen mode and somewhat jerky character-based scrolling. The soundtrack is a thing of beauty, and it set the bar high until the CD versions arrived.

SHARP X1 1987

■ This is visually identical to the PC-88 version, save for slightly smaller numbers in the HUD. The main compromise here is the soundtrack, which has been pared back to just a few PSG channels. Falcom was accused of laziness by fans, but it was very clearly limited by the hardware.





NEC PC-98 1987

■ This is basically identical to the PC-88 version, if you have the expansion sound board. If you don't, you'll lose a lot of the amazing soundtrack – beeper renditions of just two tracks are included, and to be honest they probably shouldn't have been, because they are pretty weak.

FUJITSU FM-7 1987

■ If nothing else, the Fujitsu FM-7 version of *Ys* shows off Falcom's incredible porting prowess – it looks like the other Japanese computer versions and runs just as well. The music is a step above the Sharp X1 version, but it doesn't quite reach the heights of the FM-enabled NEC versions.





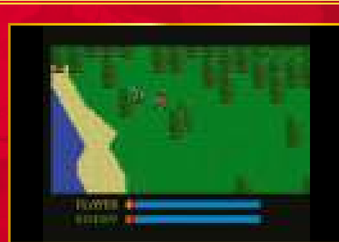
MSX2 1987

■ The graphics have been redrawn for this version of the game as the MSX2 offered superior colour handling, alongside a lower resolution, than the Japanese computers it was competing with. The PSG soundtrack is serviceable, but not as rich as the NEC, FM-77AV or Apple IIGS versions.

FAMICOM 1988

■ The first home console version of *Ys* makes some pretty substantial changes to the game's overall design, revising a number of maps, adding a whole extra quest and increasing the overall speed. There's also smooth scrolling here, which isn't featured in any of the computer versions.



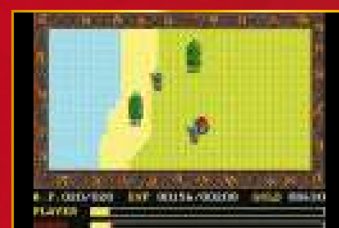


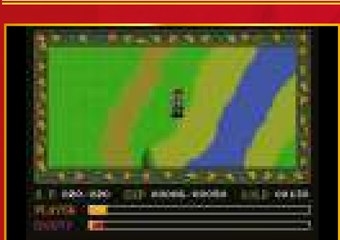
MASTER SYSTEM 1988

■ The first English language version of *Ys* to be released is pretty good. It features smooth scrolling and a decent pace of play. Some weird renaming of characters has gone on, though – in particular: why is Adol suddenly called Aron? The Japanese version also supports the FM sound module.

PC (DOS) 1989

■ This version was retranslated by the trans-Pacific publishing outfit Kyodai. It offers graphics that have been redrawn at a lower resolution than the Japanese computer releases, and there's a beeper rendition of the soundtrack. It's still enjoyable, but poor compared to other versions.





PC ENGINE 1989

■ This particular version was the first to include both *Ys I* and *Ys II* as part of the same package, and was considered a real killer app at the time. The game has been rebalanced and some nice new character portraits are shown on the screen, but it's the voice acting and CD sound that steal the show here.

SHARP X68000 1991

■ This version of *Ys* received a full overhaul, with all-new graphics (including some decidedly odd realistic character portraits) and revised maps. The town of Minea is now much bigger than the original, and a lot busier, but the field is considerably smaller. The soundtrack is well represented here.



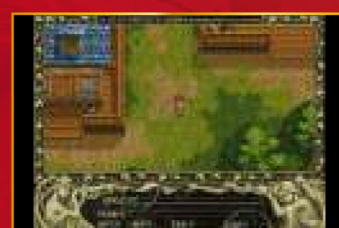


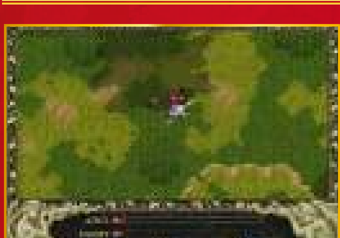
SATURN 1997

■ Appearing as part of the Falcom Classics compilation, this version features redrawn graphics and a new arrangement of the soundtrack. Better yet, Adol can finally dash and move diagonally. This one depends on your tastes – the sprite work is nice but the colours are drab compared to other releases.

PC (WINDOWS) 1997

■ *Ys Eternal* is a full remake, featuring new and expanded areas, greater story depth, and the ability to choose a difficulty mode. Very attractive high-resolution sprites replace the old artwork, and there's a newly arranged soundtrack alongside the original. This version forms the basis of all subsequent releases.





PS2 2003

■ *Ys Eternal Story* takes the PC game *Ys Complete* as a base, however it adds a combo system to combat, granting progressive bonuses as long as Adol doesn't take damage. Voice acting is added to the game, and you can choose to play *Ys* and *Ys II* together as a single experience.

DS 2008

■ *In Legacy Of Ys: Books I & II*, 2D sprites are used against 3D backgrounds (all of which are still based on *Ys Complete*), and Adol must attack manually by pressing a button unless you're using the new stylus controls. There's also an extra area included in this version, with a new boss and equipment.



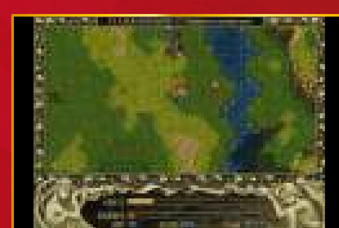


PSP 2009

■ Owners of Sony's portable system were treated to another updated version of *Ys I & II Eternal* in the form of *Ys I & II Chronicles*. This revision enhanced things with some new character artwork and another new arrangement of the soundtrack, but the older versions can still be selected.

PC (WINDOWS) 2013

■ *Ys I & II Chronicles+* is the most current version available on PC, which has all of the lovely features of the PSP version and adds a variety of achievements. If you own one of the prior versions based on *Ys I & II Eternal*, it's an almost inconsequential upgrade. Still, it's the easiest way to play *Ys* today.





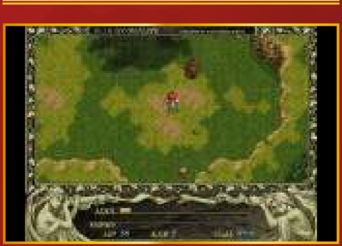
FUJITSU FM-77AV 1987

■ The FM-77AV version of *Ys* is completely identical to the FM-7 version, with the exception of improved audio that brings the game to parity with the NEC versions. If you can't find this particular version, the computer will, of course, run the standard Fijutsu FM-7 version of the game just fine, too.



APPLE IIGS 1989

■ Apple owners get a massive one over on their PC-owning cousins when it comes to *Ys*. The Apple IIGS version looks practically identical to the DOS version and it runs just as well, but the sound is absolutely worlds apart, making this version of *Ys* easily the better choice of these two versions.



PC (WINDOWS) 2001

■ *Ys Complete* is a relatively small revision which adds an FMV intro, some revisions to the graphics and wholly rewritten dialogue. All characters now have names and biographies, too. When you complete the game, a Time Attack mode is unlocked.

> "When I first started, I died really early, and I can remember thinking, 'Man, this game is hard"
>
> Toshihiro Kondo

If the first two *Ys* games are notable for their similarity, the third is notable for how it departs from the initial games. "*Ys III*, unlike *Ys I & II*, is a side-scrolling game. When I first started, I died really early, and I can remember thinking, 'Man, this game is hard!' I'd been told that the *Ys* games were friendly to newcomers and beginners, but I didn't end up feeling that way at all," recalls Kondo. Indeed, *Ys III: Wanderers From Ys* took the game mechanics from the previous games wholesale, and simply translated them into a platformer-style format akin to the *Wonder Boy* games and *Zelda II: The Adventure Of Link*. This necessitated the inclusion of an attack button for the first time, as 'bump' combat was no longer possible.

Having resolved the problems of Esteria in the first two games, Adol chose to travel with his new friend Dogi in *Ys III*. The pair went to Dogi's homeland of Felghana, where the townspeople were being threatened by soldiers from Valestein Castle. Lord MacGuire was scheming to acquire a set of mysterious statues, and would seemingly stop at nothing to get them – so naturally, Adol felt the need to step in.

Ys III: Wanderers From Ys appeared on NEC computers in 1989, and soon followed to a wide variety of console formats including English versions for the PC Engine CD, Mega Drive and SNES. While it isn't a terrible game, *Ys III* is considered to be something of a black sheep of the series, largely due to the move away from the top-down perspective. However, Mieko Ishikawa's soundtrack is considered to be one of the very best in a series renowned for great soundtracks. A faithful side-scrolling remake with rebalanced gameplay and high-resolution 2D graphics was released for PS2 in 2005, but sadly only in Japan. That isn't the end of the story for *Ys III*, as we'll discover later, but the game did mark the point at which the series took an extended leave of absence from Western markets.

Ys IV appeared on the PC Engine CD and SNES, and was a confusing project, as Kondo can attest: "One thing I remember vividly from this time is wondering, 'Why are there two versions of this game?' What I learned when I entered the company is that Falcom is not a large company. We only had the resources to come up with the game design document, then give that to somebody else." Hudson Soft took charge of *Ys IV: The Dawn Of Ys* on PC Engine, and Tonkin House developed *Ys IV: Mask Of The Sun* for the SNES.



» [SNES] Every version of *Ys IV* is very different, but *Mask Of The Sun* was the one closest to Falcom's original intentions.

The two games turned out to be quite different, but they did both return to the top-down perspective. "[With *Ys III*] people were happy that a new *Ys* came out, but by that point they associated *Ys* with the 'bump' system. The fact that we returned to that perspective was something that fans were really happy about," says Kondo. *The Dawn Of Ys* reverted to the system used in *Ys II*, while *Mask Of The Sun* revised the magic system by including the likes of harnessing elemental swords as a means of casting spells.

The two games also shared a plot and setting, with Adol making a journey to Celceta, where he first encounters the deadly forces of the Romun Empire. However, the two games differ on a number of key points, and fans have their own views on which is better – fans of *The Dawn Of Ys* contend that it is more enjoyable to play, while those who champion *Mask Of The Sun* note that the plot was closer to Falcom's design document. However, the two were able to exist side by side. "One of the cool things about having multiple versions of the same game is the fan reaction, in that all of the *Ys* games are purported to be Adol's journals, and we as the players are reading through them," Kondo explains. "The fan theory was, 'Maybe they're just different translations of the source material?' So the fans took care of it, creating a solution."

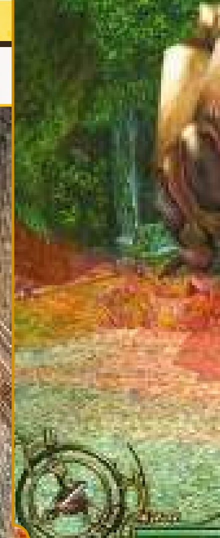
The final *Ys* game of the Nineties was *Ys V: Lost Kefin, Kingdom Of Sand*. *Ys V* chronicled Adol's first adventure on the continent of Afroca, where he searched the Xandria region for the mythical lost city of Kefin. This was Falcom's first attempt at developing a *Ys* game for home consoles, and a game which sought to add more involvement to the combat element of the game. The 'bump' system was abandoned for good in favour of a more traditional setup – attacks required the player to press an action button, and you could also jump and even actively defend with your shield. The traditional visuals were also abandoned, with characters given more realistic proportions compared to the cartoonish characters of earlier games.

The transition to console development might not have gone as smoothly as Falcom had hoped, as

» [SNES] *Ys V* doesn't carry the characteristic *Ys* style, looking much like any other SNES RPG. The desert setting is new, though.







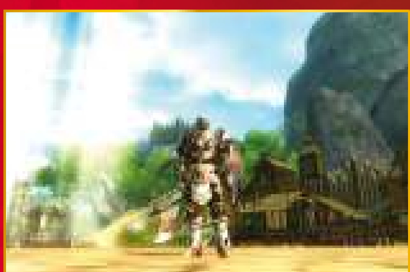
BONUS CHAPTERS

Ys has given birth to a few spin-offs over the years – let's take a look at them



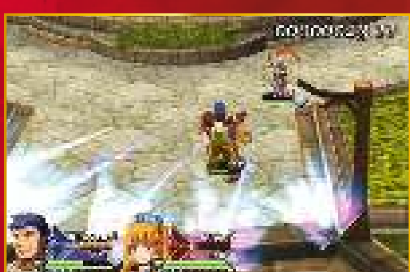
YS STRATEGY 2006

■ Released exclusively for the Nintendo DS in Japan and Europe, this game brings real-time strategy to the *Ys* series. On the surface this isn't a bad idea, but problems soon arise – the touchscreen interface works well in place of a mouse, but the hardware struggles with large battle scenes and the game generally lacks the pace required of a portable game. It's a decent RTS game for the format, but that's largely due to lack of competition.



YS ONLINE 2007

■ This relatively standard MMORPG was launched at a time when every RPG franchise with any heritage was being snapped up for the MMO treatment. Korean developer CJ Internet tackled development and turned in a game rich in *Ys* lore but short on distinguishing features. The game never made it out of beta in Europe, and by 2012 the last remaining servers in Taiwan were shut down for good, making this a dead game.



YS VS SORA NO KISEKI: ALTERNATIVE SAGA 2010

■ This spin-off pits the heroes of *Ys Seven* (and older characters, as assistants) against the characters of Falcom's popular *Trails* series of RPGs. Combat is based on *Ys Seven* and though it's often described as being similar to *Super Smash Bros*, it's closer in style to Capcom's *Power Stone* series. This is the best of the *Ys* spin-offs, but it was only released in Japan.

▶ *Ys V* was quickly succeeded by *Ys V Expert* in early 1996, just a few months after the original was released in December 1995. The game had been criticised for its lack of difficulty, resulting in this second release. Neither game is amongst the top tier of action RPG games for the SNES, and at present, *Ys V: Lost Kefin, Kingdom Of Sand* remains the only chapter of the story without an official English translation. It was also the last brand-new *Ys* game for eight years.

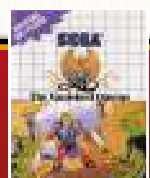
What was it that stopped the flow of new games after *Ys V*? "This is only speculation, but I believe that there was nobody at Falcom championing the game, to say, 'I want to make the next *Ys*,'" Kondo reveals to us. But by that point, *Ys* was already considered to be a heritage series in its home of Japan, and even a lack of new games couldn't keep the series off the shelves. "The thing about *Ys* is that it's a milestone in Japanese game development history and it's a game series that nobody doesn't know about," the president explains. "For the people that entered the company around the same time I did, all of them probably entered with an affection towards the series. When I first entered the company, what I did for a while was to create remakes of the old *Ys* games."

When the *Ys* series reached its tenth birthday in 1997, the first two games were remade in the form of *Ys I & II Eternal*. This kicked off a major project of remaking and updating the older *Ys* games for modern platforms – not only would *Ys I & II Eternal* be continuously updated and revised, but external developers gave *Ys III* an enhanced 2D remake, and both *Ys IV: Mask Of The Sun* and *Ys V: Lost Kefin, Kingdom Of Sand* received full 3D remakes. The third and fourth games have since been internally remade again, resulting in *Ys: The Oath In Felghana* and *Ys: Memories Of Celceta*.

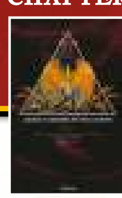
While most companies have embraced making their back catalogues available in some form, few have shown such commitment to modernising their classic releases. "The thing I was told is that a great movie is a great movie, no matter when it was made, and you can do the same thing with games," responds Kondo when asked about the philosophy behind this approach. "The content of these games, the core of what made them good, is still there. Because of that, we can remake them. That

TIMELINE

All the main games, major remakes and spin-offs in one handy list



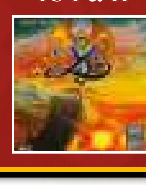
YS I: ANCIENT YS VANISHED 1987



YS II: ANCIENT YS VANISHED – THE FINAL CHAPTER 1988



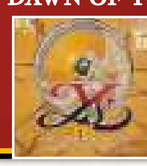
YS III: WANDERERS FROM YS 1989



YS I & II



YS IV: MASK OF THE SUN 1993



YS IV: THE DAWN OF YS



» [PC] Moving into 3D with *Ys VI: The Ark Of Napishtim* put an end to the bump system, but combat remained simple and satisfying.

"I was told is that a great movie is a great movie, no matter when it was made, and you can do the same thing with games"

Toshihiro Kondo

way the person who wants to play again can do it, but because it's modernised and updated for new hardware, that allows new fans to get into the series – and that's also important."

According to Kondo, it was tackling these remakes that gave the team the sense of ownership needed to finally push the *Ys* series into the future. "As a matter of course, during making these remakes, the team gained a feeling that 'we want to make a new one too, we want to see what Adol's next adventure is'," he explains. "We'd just made *Ys I & II Eternal*, and we were told, 'Okay, it's time to make *Ys III Eternal*.' And we said, 'No, we've accumulated a lot of knowledge of game development and design – let us make *Ys VI*, please.' We were finally able to convince the founder to allow us to do that, and that's where *Ys VI* came from. So this was a natural progression of working on the series, and my team was the one which took on *Ys VI*."

Ys VI: The Ark Of Napishtim took Adol to the furthest reaches of the *Ys* universe seen so far, the Canaan Islands, where he awakens after being attacked by Romun ships. It also introduced a new graphical style, featuring 3D environments and prerendered 2D sprites, and retained the more involved combat of *Ys V*. The game was initially released for PC in 2003, and Konami picked it up for a PS2 release in 2005 – bringing the series back outside of Japan in the process. Reception to the game was mixed, but broadly positive. Eurogamer offered it 6/10, noting that it had "really quite nice graphics, lovely artwork in parts and fantastic music", but complaining that "it's hard to escape just how old-fashioned some of the game mechanics seem to be". This didn't matter, as the return of *Ys* quickly picked up into overdrive.

By the mid-Noughties, the *Ys* series was as active as it had been at its peak in the late Eighties. This led to the first ever prequel in the series, 2006's *Ys Origin*. As it was set centuries before the events of the original game, Adol doesn't star in the game – instead, you can choose between three characters with their own combat styles. The plot concerned the original battle between the land of Ys and demonic forces. The twin goddesses Reah and Feena had disappeared from Ys and returned to the surface, having seemingly gone to Darm Tower. Convinced that Ys would not survive without the goddesses, the six priests of Ys organised a search party to find them, and that's where the player comes in. The game was a PC exclusive for over a decade before coming to PlayStation Vita and PS4 in 2017, and the game received a better critical reception than its predecessor.

However, it's unlikely that we'll see a game like *Ys Origin* any time soon. "*Ys I & II* are iconic games and *Ys Origin* was a love letter to them, so I'd like to make *Ys Origin II* and continue that story because I really like exploring that aspect of the lore," Kondo admits. "However, the general consensus in the company is 'let's do something new' so I don't know if or when I'll have time to do it again. Of course, the setting of the *Ys* lore is that there are over 100 of Adol's journals, and we're only at eight, so we need to get going!"

Indeed, the next Falcom-developed game in the series was the next numbered instalment, simply titled *Ys Seven*. This was the first game in the series to be developed primarily for a handheld system, as it made its debut on the PSP in 2009. Adol and Dogi travel together once more, this time visiting Altago, where strange earthquakes have been disturbing the population. However, the fact that Adol wasn't travelling alone would become significant beyond plot points for the first time, as he is accompanied by other party members during battle. "When developing for consumer systems, we needed to keep the whole screen lively, and that's what led to the party system," Kondo explains. "Adol is obviously the focal point while playing, but you have other characters on the screen doing other things as well to create this really vibrant, interesting look." *Ys Seven* was well-liked by the press thanks to its addictive combat, with an 8/10 score from *games™* broadly representative of its reception.

The most recent game in the series is *Ys VIII: Lacrimosa Of Dana*, which was released for PlayStation Vita in 2016 in Japan, and worldwide for Vita and PS4 in 2017. The game has placed a broader emphasis on other characters than any *Ys* game before, in particular thanks to a new character called Dana, a mysterious girl who appears in Adol's dreams. "One thing that we discussed is that for 30 years, Adol has been the main character, and for 30 years we've been seeing things ▶





» [PSP] Many of Adol's adventures begin with some kind of accident at sea, leading to Dogi's playful jab here.



> **“We needed to keep the whole screen lively, and that’s what led to the party system”**
> Toshihiro Kondo

from his perspective,” explains Kondo. “The big focal point when developing *Ys VIII* was how to overcome this problem, if you can call it a problem. So the solution was to have sequences in the game where Adol is dreaming, and seeing the world through somebody else’s eyes. That allows us to do something new with the perspective while still being faithful to the idea that this is Adol’s story.”

But Dana isn’t the only other character who matters in *Ys VIII*. “Up until now, it’s been Adol’s tale by himself,” says Kondo. “In *Ys VIII*, you’re on a passenger liner that sinks, and Adol has to find the rest of the passengers so you get to see all of them and their stories. The amount of people that are involved in the story and have their own arcs through it is much greater than in previous Ys games.” This plays into the game design in the form of side quests too, according to Kondo. “Because you’re searching for companions who were with you on the boat, in addition you’re on a deserted island that you’re mapping, so when you find these people they come together and build a village, and you’re able to grow that village throughout the course of the game.” *Ys VIII* has done very well with critics, with the PS4 release holding a commendable score of 85 on Metacritic. Praise for the game is focused on the engaging characters, the large amount of additional content besides the main game’s quest, and a combat system which allows for fast and satisfying battles.

Despite the ups and downs of Falcom itself and a lengthy period outside of the international spotlight, the *Ys* series has endured because it maintains its status as an approachable entry point to the Japanese RPG scene. With easy-to-learn combat and self-contained stories, it’s not hard to jump into a *Ys* game – yet for the long-term fan there’s plenty of interesting lore to discover, and depth to the combat systems that ensures that they remain satisfying over the whole course of the game. That satisfying feeling of popping bubble wrap has never gone away – and so long as it remains a fixture of the *Ys* series, the *Ys* series will remain a fixture of videogaming. *



» [PS4] Later games allow you to partner with other characters, and even experience their unique combat styles for yourself.

THE WORLD OF YS

Adol’s adventurous nature means that he rarely stays in one place for too long – just check out the locations he’s explored



YS

YS II: ANCIENT YS VANISHED – THE FINAL CHAPTER, YS I & II

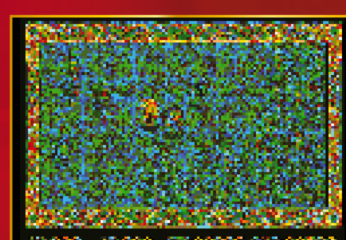
■ The floating land is the setting for the second game. According to *Ys Origin*, it was raised from the ground to guard against demonic attacks.



VORTEX OF CANAAN

YS VI: THE ARK OF NAPISHTIM

■ Within this dangerous storm lies the Canaan Islands, a civilisation cut off from the rest of the world. Pirates have long been interested in rumours of treasure here.



CELCETA

YS IV: MASK OF THE SUN, YS IV: THE DAWN OF YS, YS: MEMORIES OF CELCETA

■ Dense forests cover this land, which is officially claimed by the Romun Empire. Most of the settlements in Celceta are so isolated that there is no de facto Romun control.



ESTERIA

YS I: ANCIENT YS VANISHED, YS I & II

■ Located in the French-inspired region of Gllia, access to Esteria by sea is blocked by a permanent storm, which Adol miraculously survives at the beginning of the game.

FELGHANA

YS III: WANDERERS FROM YS, YS: THE OATH IN FELGHANA

■ Dogi's home is much like the man himself: mountainous. Because of this, it's an area that is isolated from much of the continent.

SEIREN ISLAND

YS VIII: LACRIMOSA OF DANA

■ Located off the coast of Greek, these islands are said to be a place where ships go missing. Adol winds up shipwrecked here after an all-too-predictable mishap at sea.

ALTAGO

YS SEVEN

■ Though rich and varied in its geography, Altago's unique distinction is having 'Dragon Energy' flowing through everything that's living and non-living.

XANDRIA

YS V: LOST KEFIN, KINGDOM OF SAND

■ Drought blights this formerly prosperous land, with much of the formerly verdant area turning to desert. Rumour has it that a lost city was once here too…

The Making Of TOONSTRUCK



Paul Walker-Emig speaks to Toonstruck cowriter and designer Jennifer McWilliams and artist John Piampiano about creating a cult cartoon point-and-click classic



IN THE KNOW

» **PUBLISHER:** Virgin Interactive Entertainment

» **DEVELOPER:** Burst Studios

» **RELEASED:** 1996

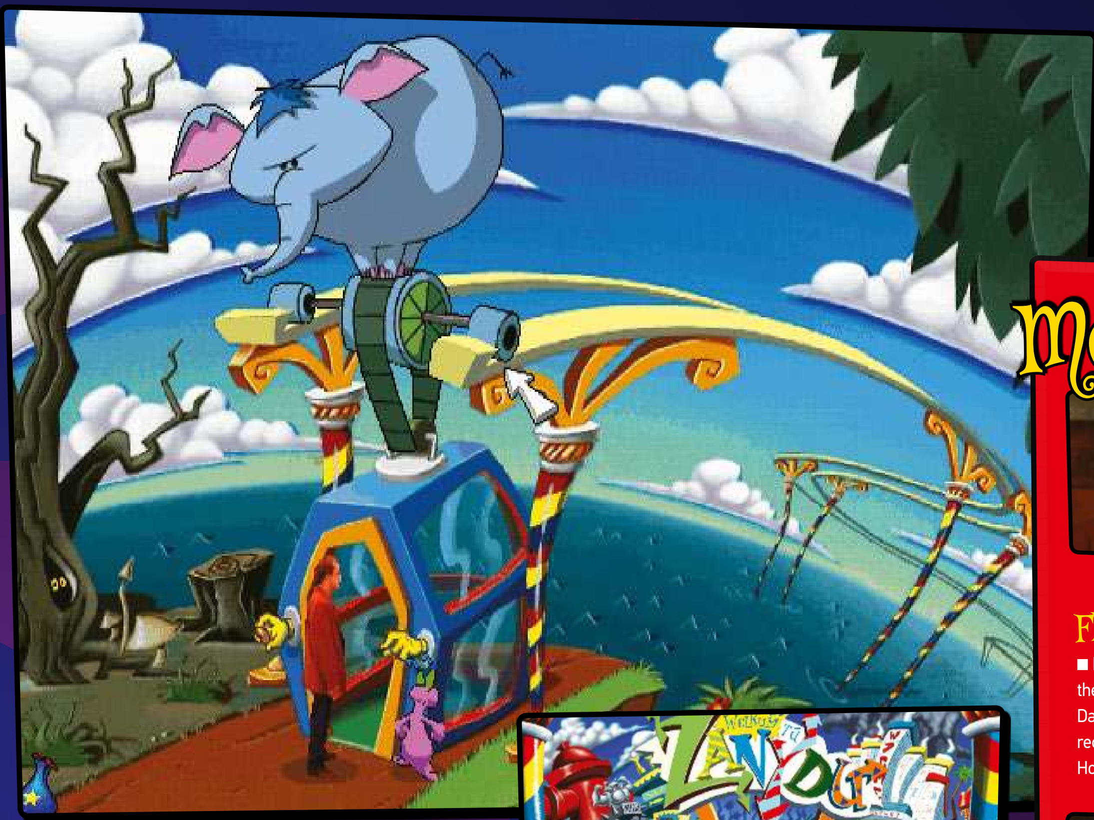
» **PLATFORM:** PC

» **PLATFORM:** Point-and-click

***Toonstruck* could have been a very different game had the design team stuck faithfully to the concept originally floated by their executive producer, David Bishop.** "David had the seed of an idea for a children's game where a villain was draining the colour out of the world, turning it black and white," cowriter and designer Jennifer McWilliams tells us. Once Jennifer and her colleagues got their hands on the idea, however, it was soon transformed. "He gave the concept to the design team and next thing you know, he had bovine S&M, insane clowns, fish-flushing, and all the rest. Poor guy," she jokes.

The idea of an antagonist transforming a cartoon world stuck, albeit with a twist. The game's story revolves around Count Nefarious' plot to remould the cartoon realms of Cutopia and Zanydu in his image. He sends out a ship equipped with a beam that transforms cute and cuddly landscapes and the characters that inhabit them into twisted versions of themselves. Hence the cow Jennifer referred to, whose love for butter becomes a love for bondage after being hit with Count Nefarious' weapon. Clearly, the idea that this would be a children's





» [PC] *Toonstruck*'s development team aimed for *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* levels of visual design.

game didn't stick. There was still plenty of silliness, but some comic violence and a penchant for parody with a hint of cynicism skewed the game towards a slightly older audience.

Regardless of the changes made to the original idea proposed by David, Virgin Interactive decided to back *Toonstruck* to the hilt, investing a lot of money in the project. The game seemed to encapsulate an ethos that the company held at the time. It bleeds through in Virgin Interactive's memorable introductory video – a pulsating eyeball being assaulted with visual imagery as the beep of a heart-rate monitor grows ever quicker, the crescendo a flatline. The video seemed designed to suggest that this was a company whose games push things to the limit, harnessing the power of CD-ROMs to do mind-blowing things that hadn't been done before.

"Yes, that was true," says Jennifer when we ask if that accurately reflects the company's approach. "I think the success of the *7th Guest* (one of the very first games to be released on CD-ROM, published by Virgin just before *Toonstruck*'s development began) really inspired the company to see if it could take CD-ROM technology even further. We were empowered to make the game as cinematic as possible, in some ways treating it like a movie as well as an adventure game," she explains.

John Piampiano, an artist who, "was originally brought on to do background paintings", but ended up working on a whole host of tasks including, "character development, storyboarding, character and background colour styling, 2D effects animation, logo design, gaming icon design, marketing promos," and more, confirms that Virgin were keen to push *Toonstruck* into new territory.

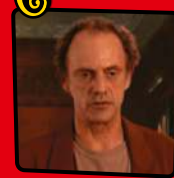
"There was definitely a conscious effort to create a more cinematic gaming experience, one that transported three-dimensional elements of reality into a 2D cartoon world both literally and figuratively," John recalls. "Hyperrealistic 3D gaming technology was about to explode in the industry, so *Toonstruck* was a bit of a swan song to what would eventually be the decline of 2D gaming platforms, whether intentional or otherwise," he continues. "Naturally, Virgin wanted all the bells and whistles it could possibly cram in".



» [PC] The Warner Bros influences are pretty clear to see once you step into the wacky realm of Zanydu.

Indeed, the production values on show in *Toonstruck* was something that really stood out at the time – cutscenes that seemed more like something you'd see in a cartoon than a videogame, with a star-studded voice cast and rich and colourful backgrounds. John tells us that those impressive locations, characters, and animations were influenced by classic Warner Bros cartoons, Tex Avery, Hannah Barbara, and Disney, sprinkled with "humorous nods to iconic action adventure films and television" and some "British humour referencing and lampooning American pop culture". From the bizarre and wacky region of Zanydu where its inhabitants enjoy nothing more than smacking each other upside the head with their Wacme gadgets (there's that Warner Bros influence), to the saccharine sweet hills ▶

Meet The Cast



Drew Blanc

■ With a bit of greenscreen magic, Christopher Lloyd was transported in *Toonstruck*'s cartoon world to play frustrated cartoonist and protagonist Drew Blanc.



Flux Wildly

■ Drew's sidekick is a toon of the looney variety, played by Dan Castellaneta, who you may recognise as the iconic voice of Homer Simpson.



Sam Schmultz

■ Ben Stein makes a brief appearance as Drew's boss in the game's opening, ordering him to produce a new collection of fluffy bunnies by the following morning.



Count Nefarious

■ Acting virtuoso Tim Curry puts in a fantastic performance as the voice of the delectably evil Count Nefarious – the game's primary antagonist.



King Hugh

■ Voiced by David Ogden Stiers, King Hugh promises to return Drew to his world, providing he helps stop Count Nefarious first.



Feedback, Goggles & Lugnut

■ These three henchmen, played by Jim Cummings, Corey Burton, and Rob Paulsen, frequently show up searching for Drew and Flux.



Spike The Clown

■ Jeff Bennett played a number of characters in *Toonstruck*, including one of the most memorable in Count Nefarious' twisted court jester.

Weird Adventures

Five other strange point-and-click adventures



Normality

■ Set in a dystopic police state where fun is prohibited, you play as a character who gets arrested for whistling a happy tune at the beginning of the game. *Normality* had a rather odd control mechanic where you click on the different parts of a voodoo doll representing your character to interact with the world.



Frog Fractions

■ We don't know whether 'point-and-click' is quite the right way to describe *Frog Fractions*, but then, this is a game that defies any definition you try to give it. Calling this bizarre trip a comedy adventure hidden behind an educational game is as good as any other description.



Samorost

■ Made by the team behind the better known *Machinarium*, *Samorost* is beautiful point-and-click game where you solve puzzles by interacting with the environment – there's no inventory or dialogue. The game's visuals and music combine to give it a surreal, but pleasant, feel. You can play it for free in a web browser.





▶ of Cutopia (that's where Disney comes in), this was a world that felt as if had been created with the investment of an unusual amount of time and money for the standards of the day.

"That would be a colossal understatement," says John. "The producers of the game and execs at Virgin wanted a product that would wow its audience. It was ambitious to say the very least. So much of the game was handled like a full-scale movie production on just about every level, from storyboarding, to endless frame-by-frame conversion, and manipulation of live-action footage compressed to work in a 2D environment," John explains. "A huge amount of 2D characters and animation were developed and keyframed in-house, then farmed overseas to be fleshed out. I accompanied one of our in-house lead animators to the Philippines to assist and oversee animation production for a short period. The vision behind *Toonstruck* was always meant to feel cinematic in much the way '*Who Framed Roger Rabbit*' ambitiously pushed boundaries of integrating 2D and 3D visuals."

When you're trying to create a movie-like production, it makes sense to bring movie stars on board. *Toonstruck* did that with its *Roger Rabbit*-esque blend of live-action footage and cartoon animation. Christopher Lloyd of *Back To The Future* fame took the lead role of Drew Blanc, the frustrated creator of the Fluffy Fluffy Bun Bun Show who, suffering from creative block, pulls an all-nighter, falls asleep, and wakes up in *Toonstruck*'s cartoon world. Ben Stein makes an appearance as Drew's boss, Tim Curry lends his voice to Count Nefarious, and Dan Castellaneta, best known for playing Homer in *The Simpsons*, plays Drew Blanc's toon companion, Flux Wildly.

Jennifer tells us that most of the writing was done before the actors were locked in, though as a Tim Curry fan, she happened to have written a lot of the characters with him in mind. "We actually had a different actor cast as Flux," Jennifer reveals, "but after a couple of recording sessions it became clear that he wasn't going to be a good fit. We were extremely fortunate to replace him with Dan Castellaneta, who was just a few years into his run with *The Simpsons* at the time."

"He was an extremely useful little guy," says Jennifer when we ask why the decision was made to give Drew a cartoon companion. "From a story perspective, Flux gave us a window into the 'real' Drew, and he also gave our hero a fun-loving sidekick. He was critical in terms of the dialogue as



DEVELOPER HIGHLIGHTS

TOONSTRUCK
SYSTEM: PC, MAC
YEAR: 1996

SPOT GOES TO HOLLYWOOD
SYSTEM: PLAYSTATION, SATURN
YEAR: 1996

SUBSPACE
SYSTEM: PC
YEAR: 1997



» [PC] Once you get into Malevoland, you find yourself in less cute and colourful surrounding and encounter some less-friendly characters.





Kentucky Route Zero

■ This episodic, magical realist point-and-click is one of the strangest places we've ever had the pleasure of exploring. It has a dreamlike quality, meaning forever at the edge of comprehension, reality always malleable. It's also got some of the most memorable musical moments you'll ever encounter in a videogame.



The Neverhood

■ This game's claymation art gave it a unique look. *The Neverhood* takes place on a strange and empty planet populated by strange creatures, that it turns out was created by a lonely god. The game got a spiritual sequel in the form of 2015's *Armikrog* from Pencil Test Studios.





> "We were fortunate that the company for the most part stood back and let us do our thing"
>
> Jennifer McWilliams

well – so much of the game's humour came from the relationship and the banter between Flux and Drew. And he was a great addition for puzzles."

Thinking about the game as a movie-style production helps to explain some of the design elements that make *Toonstruck* stand out from its adventure game contemporaries. The game tried to give you a sense of time passing to tie what was happening around you to a story which was telling you that you were in a race against time to stop Nefarious. For example, when you moved into a new area, you might be treated to a cutscence where Nefarious would talk about the problems you were causing and order his goons to hunt you down. Later, those goons would show up looking for you and you'd have to find somewhere to hide to stop yourself being discovered. The point-and-click genre is one where time often feels static, its worlds frozen in a moment in time until you solve all the puzzles you need to progress to the next act In contrast, *Toonstruck* gave you the sense that the plot was always progressing as you explored.

"We really wanted to create a living world – one that would evolve as the game's events unfolded," Jennifer explains. "We tried to accomplish that with the cutscenes, with the dialogue, and with the art. In terms of the dialogue, we had all played games where an NPC would continue to say something like, 'Lovely weather we're having!' after a dragon had incinerated the entire town," she continues. "In *Toonstruck*, if you spoke to a character after a critical event, in most cases they would comment on it rather than simply repeating their original dialogue from the earlier parts of the game."

So far, our tale of *Toonstruck*'s making has been overwhelmingly positive: a design team given big money backing, fantastic art, big stars, witty dialogue, and some clever structural touches. *Toonstruck*'s development was not without problems, however. As the game neared release, Virgin made the decision to split it in two and save the latter half for a sequel. "We were full of ideas, so we designed… and designed… and designed… with a great deal of focus on what would be cool and interesting and funny, and not so much focus on what would actually be achievable within a set schedule and budget," Jennifer says. "We were fortunate that the company for the most part stood back and let us do our thing, but when it became clear that we had designed enough for two games or more, the powers that be in management had to step in and give us a dose of reality. We then needed to come up with an ending that could credibly wrap the game up halfway through, with a cliffhanger that would, ideally, introduce part two. I think we did well considering the constraints we were under, but still, it was not what we originally envisioned," Jennifer laments. "The game was designed and written with a carefully-thought-out story arc, and cutting it in the middle definitely disrupted that.

"*Toonstruck* was meant to be a funny story about defeating some really weird bad guys, as it was when released, but originally it was also about defeating one's own creative demons," Jennifer tells us. "It was a tribute to creative folks of all types and was meant to offer encouragement to any of them that had lost their way. So, the second part of



» [PC] This isn't the only time during the game that Drew and Flux find themselves in a spot of bother.

the game had Drew venturing into his own psyche, facing his fears (like a psychotically overeager dentist), living out his fantasies (like meeting his hero, Vincent Van Gogh), and eventually finding a way to restore his creative spark."

Unfortunately, though critically well received, *Toonstruck* did not sell well. Given its hefty production costs, it's unsurprising that this led to Virgin deciding to leave the near-finished sequel on the cutting room floor. It's great that over 20 years later, *Toonstruck* is still being played, in part thanks to its release on platforms like Steam and GOG, but we still wish we had gotten to see the conclusion to Drew Blanc's story. There have been hints at prospects of reviving *Toonstruck 2* over the years, but they've never amounted to anything. If the whispers we hear in the wind at **Retro Gamer** Towers are to be believed, however, the possibility that we'll get to see the sequel that never was might not be dead just yet… ✱





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Krusty's Super Fun House

SEND IN THE CLOWNS



» SNES » ACCLAIM » 1992

It's no secret that when it came to the console wars of the early Nineties, I was a child firmly in the Sega camp. As a result, my early SNES experiences were largely shaped by the buying choices of those around me – friends, cousins and the like. *Krusty's Fun House* was a game I discovered through this limited method, as the SNES-owning friends nearest to my home only had four games. I'd already eliminated *Super Mario World* (not *Sonic*) and *Super Ghouls 'N Ghosts* (too frustrating), and had *The Legend Of Zelda: A Link To The Past* eliminated for me ("It's boring because there's too much reading," my woefully misguided friend explained). But everyone likes *The Simpsons*, and as I count as a subset of everyone, I thought I'd give *Krusty* a try.

Krusty's Super Fun House is a weird game without context – I never knew what Krusty was doing catching rats, and I wasn't aware of the Amiga original *Rat Trap*. It was an easy game to get into though, as I've always loved elaborate devices and this game encourages you to construct them in your pursuit of a rat-free building. Plus, after having my arse kicked up and down the street by *Super Ghouls 'N Ghosts*, the more sedate pace of the game suited me quite nicely. I always wanted to get a copy for my own console, but never came across one before I moved on to other things. Maybe now's the right time to do it. *

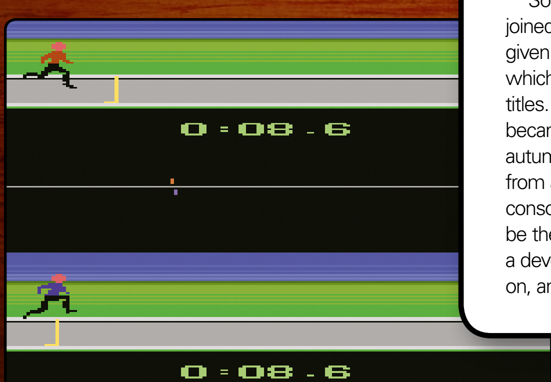


40 YEARS OF THE Atari

ALTHOUGH INTENDED TO HAVE A SHORT LIFESPAN, THE 2600 DEFIED ALL EXPECTATIONS AND STILL REMAINS POPULAR FOUR DECADES LATER. RORY MILNE CHARTS THE HIGHS AND LOWS OF ATARI'S PIONEERING CONSOLE

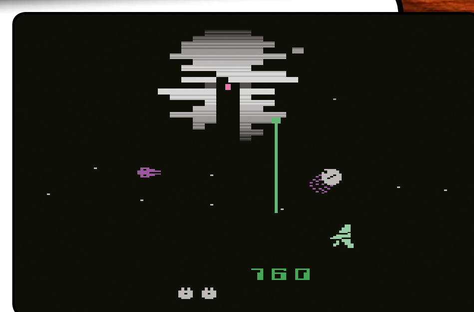






A major milestone in videogame history was marked in July of 1977 when the first Atari Video Computer System rolled off a production line in California. However, Atari's think tank – Cyan Engineering – had been discussing ideas for a programmable game system as early as 1975. In light of the long lead time required by the console – now better known as the 2600 – it's perhaps unsurprising that Atari recruited the first member of its launch games team – Larry Kaplan – almost a year before mass production began. "I was working in Silicon Valley, this is August of 1976, and Atari put an ad in the newspaper for programmers," Larry begins. "Atari at the time was a coin-op company, but there was a new consumer division – that was six people – and I interviewed with them to be a game programmer for their new system, the 2600."

Soon after, three additional coders joined Larry, and the small group were given preproduction hardware on which to develop the 2600's launch titles. This gang of four subsequently became six, and following the console's autumn launch, the team switched from assembly code to assembling consoles for what they thought might be the 2600's only Christmas. "We had a development system that we worked on, and the whole of 1977 was doing



» [Atari 2600] *Death Star Battle* lacks depth, but the Parker Brothers shooter is fun in short bursts.

games," remembers Larry. "It was kind of a tough situation because production was way behind. So during Christmas, they actually made all the employees – including us engineers – work on the assembly line to keep up with orders. No one knew how long the 2600 would last, they assumed one Christmas, maybe two at most, and then we would move on to the next product. The launch titles were okay – there was *Combat*, and I did *Air-Sea Battle*."

Although not official coin-op conversions, these two launch games – and many of the other initial 2600 releases – were based on arcade favourites, which set the trend for Atari's 2600 output for 1978, as developer David Crane confirms. "It was ironic that we were tasked with making home versions of $3,000 arcade games on the lowly $200 2600, but as game programmers at Atari, we were

2600



CLASSICS

ATARI The creator and life-long supporter of the Atari 2600

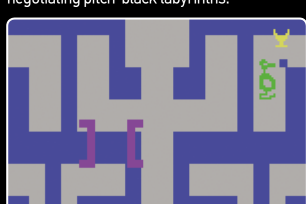


COMBAT

■ The 2600's first game, and the system's original pack-in title, *Combat* still represents a highly compelling competitive experience. Largely based on the coin-ops *Tank* and *Jet Fighter*, the two-player-only *Combat* is a top-down shootout against the clock featuring tanks, biplanes and jet planes where the player that destroys their opponent the most times is declared the winner. The game's 27 modes feature embellishments such as mazes, corner-turning bullets, invisible tanks and giant jets.

ADVENTURE

■ Widely considered to be the earliest example of the action adventure genre, Warren Robinett's *Adventure* was nothing short of a revelation when it was released in late-1979. Before *Adventure*, videogames had either one or a sequence of separate single-screen playfields, but Warren's game depicts a sprawling world using interconnected screen-sized locations. *Adventure*'s challenge is to return a chalice to a castle while battling dragons, dodging bats and negotiating pitch-black labyrinths.





YARS' REVENGE

■ Howard Scott Warshaw's debut caters for both casual players and hardcore shooter fans by offering difficulty settings ranging from slow and stripped-back to high-octane and full-featured. Its core gameplay tasks an insect-like Yar with avoiding a heat-seeking drone and depleting an enemy Quotile's shield before dispatching it with a long-range missile. *Yars' Revenge* also features an ion zone that's vulnerable to attacking Quotiles and disables the Yar's weapons but also provides protection from drones.

SOLARIS

■ Developed by Doug Neubauer, creator of *Star Raiders*, *Solaris* was a late, great Atari 2600 exclusive. The games have almost identical mechanics – each involves starfield navigation and cosmic shootouts, but *Solaris*' gameplay is less complex and its playfield is more expansive. *Solaris*' main evolution is that it allows you to land on federation planets for refuelling or to defend human colonies, and to invade alien planets and destroy them following the rescue of groups of space cadets.



CLASSICS

ACTIVISION

The first, and arguably best, third-party 2600 publisher



PITFALL!

■ Curiously enough, *Pitfall!* is a platformer that doesn't really have platforms, but David Crane's classic contains more than enough platforming standards to justify its place in the genre. Specifically, hero Pitfall Harry has to jump over pits – naturally – swing on ropes over hazards, avoid creepy-crawlies, vault rolling logs and collect hidden treasure. Of course, the game's appeal lies in its implementation, which boasts smooth-scrolling, tight controls, well-constructed levels and slick presentation.

H.E.R.O.

■ Arguably the best Superman game never made, John Van Ryzin's *H.E.R.O.* was reworked when he discovered that Atari owned the DC Comics licence. Having a vulnerable hero led John to populate the sprawling mazes of his cave-based rescue mission with indigenous threats like bats and snakes. The vulnerability of the game's rocket-packed, laser-blasting protagonist also inspired the designer to arm his hero with dynamite that could potentially blow him up as easily as obstructive walls.





RIVER RAID

■ Technically a scrolling shooting gallery where opponents don't return fire, Carol Shaw's *River Raid* is never the less as tough as 2600 shooters come. The game's challenge lies in balancing conflicting objectives, so while navigating tight ravines and dispatching river and air-based enemies are primary considerations, these goals have to be reconciled with slower-paced fuel collection. Additionally, *River Raid*'s infinite amount of levels are algorithmically generated, so each one is unique.

PITFALL II

■ David Crane chose to go 'bigger and better' when following-up his massively popular 2600 platformer. As well being much expanded, *Pitfall II*'s playfield scrolls, rather than flicking from one self-contained screen to another, and allows downwards as well as sideways travel. Aside from enhancing *Pitfall*'s premise, the sequel's mechanical enhancements are something of a technical achievement, as is *Pitfall II* as a whole, and this likely goes a long way to explaining its glowing reputation.



THE SOFTWARE HOUSE

Activision's David Crane on the evolution of 2600 gaming



What did you initially think of the 2600 and its early games?

When I attended GameTronics 1976 in the San Francisco Bay Area, the Fairchild Channel F was featured there, and I played tennis with Alan Miller, who was working at Atari on Atari 2600 games. Based on discussions, he invited me into Atari to interview for a position making games there. I saw the potential and took the job. I saw the games at the time as indicative of what the system could do. I appreciated the way the Atari designers could think outside of the box in order to make the limited 2600 hardware play a diverse mix of games.

Why were so many early 2600 titles based on arcade games?

Atari's primary strategy for creating the Atari 2600 was to bring their arcade hits to the home. The 2600 hardware was designed to play *Tank* and *Pong*; it was made cartridge-programmable so Atari could sell two cartridges. Every other game made for the 2600 was a pleasant surprise for the hardware team. Not until most of the arcade games had been duplicated on the 2600 were we able to start thinking of original games.

Why was *Pitfall!* not followed-up sooner?

The impetus behind *Pitfall II* was a custom integrated circuit I designed that went inside the cartridge and expanded the capabilities of the 2600. With that chip, I brought the 2600 even closer to the theoretical 'new console in a cartridge' paradigm that had made the 2600 so successful.

How did it feel to leave 2600 development behind after *Skateboardin'* in 1987?

I always loved making games for the 2600. The challenges, while seemingly insurmountable, only served to make me more driven to squeeze more horsepower out of the system. *Skateboardin'* was a business opportunity to reach out to people who still loved and played the 2600.

How would you explain the 2600's lengthy commercial lifespan?

The 2600 was inadvertently far more capable than other consoles created in the Seventies and Eighties. It allowed more control over the game experience than systems where the hardware was more capable but more rigidly defined. The 2600 was in more homes than any other console. That fact alone made it the first choice for game creators.

> "Al Miller wanted a royalty, and Ray [Kassar] said: 'No.' He said we were 'a dime a dozen'"
> Larry Kaplan



» [Atari 2600] Given the 2600's limitations, Parker Brothers' *Q*bert* is a faithful adaptation of the coin-op.

encouraged to port their arcade games to the 2600. *Outlaw*, *Canyon Bomber* and many others were based on existing arcade games."

Atari's policy of taking its lead from coin-ops proved popular, and this was reflected in sales of the 2600 quadrupling between 1978 and 1979. Pioneering designer Warren Robinett puts this growth spurt down to increased awareness and a rapidly expanding games library. "It takes a while for the word to spread about a new product that's good; that was probably part of it. And as the number of available games increased that probably increased the attractiveness of the 2600."

But while Warren's first 2600 game – *Slot Racers* – closely adhered to Atari's arcade-derived house style, his second – *Adventure* – spawned a new genre and introduced the concept of a world that couldn't be contained within a single screen. "I didn't set out to break the mould with *Adventure*," Warren clarifies, "but I found a new template. I thought that this text adventure game with a 'rooms and objects' concept – *Colossal Cave Adventure* – was cool, and I wanted to do that on the 2600. So I came up with this 'driving off the edge of the screen' thing, and that resulted in creating a much bigger world than one screen. But nobody told me I was inventing a new genre; it just seemed like one more 2600 cartridge."

But rather than praise, Warren's boss heaped criticism on him for creating *Adventure*, and the developer left Atari in 1979. Larry Kaplan explains why he and three colleagues followed suit later that year after a run-in with Atari CEO Ray Kassar. "Management kept claiming there were no profits. One big joke was that they had something called DBOI – 'Departmental Budget Operating Income'. We were supposed to share in that as engineers, but we ended up calling it: 'Don't Bet On It', because we never did. Warner was pouring money into Atari during 1979, and we were trying to figure out what to do. So we said: 'Lets go and see Ray,' because 2600 cartridges were selling in the millions. So Al Miller wanted a royalty, and Ray said: 'No.' He said we were 'a dime a dozen.'"



» [Atari 2600] *Keystone Kapers* played to the 2600's strengths, thanks to its simple, yet compelling, setup.



Subsequently, the four coders – Larry, Al, David Crane and Bob Whitehead – resigned and set up the first third-party console publisher, the output of which massively boosted the 2600's reputation, as David notes. "Because Activision initially featured the 2600, we made Atari's console into the de facto standard. But Activision's designers had to innovate or die. First, we didn't own any arcade properties to port, and second, we were the new kids and we initially had to struggle to create new games, a new trademark and a new business model. I know that we felt pushed by our prior work – feeling the need to make every game better than anything we had ever done before."

The drive to better their previous 2600 titles, the need to create original games and the cumulative knowledge they had accrued while at Atari resulted in Activision becoming a huge success in short order. The firm's fortunes ultimately persuaded the majority of Atari's remaining 2600 developers to establish or join third-party firms, and two years later, Atari had a fresh set of coders facing a steep learning curve, as Larry Kaplan points out. "After we left, the Imagic guys left and then the 20th Century Fox guys. By 1981, all Atari had, basically, were new people. The problem was that everyone who left already had three years of experience, so we knew how to do stuff – and those guys didn't. If Atari had given us royalties we would have all stayed there; it would have made a billion dollars, it would have been Nintendo. But Atari totally fucked it up. Us leaving split everything up, everybody had to reinvent the technology and there were all these suits going on. It was just a mess, and we could have all been doing games."

Despite the mess, Atari's former designers weren't alone in third-party 2600 development for long. Rex Bradford started coding *Empire Strikes Back* for Parker Brothers in 1981, and feels the console's best games emerged in the 18 months that followed. "It seemed to me like the 'golden period' of some of the best 2600 games was the second half of 1981 and 1982. It was certainly the period in which graphics techniques got refined. There were much better thoughts about how to reuse sprites multiple times on the screen in order to get better-looking displays. Also, by 1982, there were bank-switch cartridges for 8K games. *Empire Strikes Back* came out May 1982, or something. There hadn't been a huge amount of games out at that point, but Activision had published some of their great stuff – *Tennis* and *Ice Hockey*.



CLASSICS

IMAGIC

The short-lived publisher that made the 2600 sing



DEMON ATTACK

■ An early Imagic release, and the subject of a lawsuit brought by Atari, Rob Fullop's *Demon Attack* became a bestseller for the third-party developer. Inspired by Namco's *Galaxian*, but closer to Taito's *Phoenix*, Rob's multicoloured shooter constantly reinvents its challenge by rotating a cast of winged opponents from round to round and tweaking their offensive capabilities on each repeat appearance. As well as varied gameplay, Rob's game boasts slick presentation and high-res sprites.

ATLANTIS

■ This shares elements with *Defender* and *Missile Command* – there are high-res foes that get faster and more numerous over time, and the hero's weapons are fired from three fixed locations at the foot of the screen. Superficial similarities aside, Dennis Koble's graphically impressive shooter doesn't play like either coin-op. The game's three lasers each fire in one fixed direction: up-and-left, straight-up and up-and-right, which makes timing and accuracy the keys to your success.





COSMIC ARK

■ The sequel to *Atlantis* – if you believe *Cosmic Ark*'s manual, but actually the two games only have a starship sprite in common. More importantly, Rob Fullop's title excels in gameplay terms by alternating between shooter and rescue mission, and becoming progressively harder from level to level. *Cosmic Ark*'s main appeal lies in its unpredictable cuts between shootouts in a mothership and beaming-up aliens in a drone ship, and from the interactions of these two disparate challenges.

FATHOM

■ Although in some respects a triumph of style over substance, *Fathom* does provide compelling gameplay and an interesting premise to complement its striking visuals. Specifically, the game has you switching between a dolphin collecting sea horses and a seabird collecting clouds in order to assemble a trident required to rescue Neptune's daughter from a prison on the ocean floor. *Fathom* is far from easy, but there is a smooth difficulty curve to its seven colourful stages.





THE GRAPHIC ARTIST

Artist Alan Murphy on the limitations of 2600 graphics



What were your first impressions of 2600 game visuals?
I first saw the 2600 when I was hired at Atari in 1980. I had been playing arcade games and wasn't too impressed with 'Stella', as the engineers called it. I actually thought most of the games sucked. Until Atari brought in artists, all art was done by programmers, most of whom had little or no art training. The art was so bad in most games you'd be forgiven for not wanting anything to do with them.

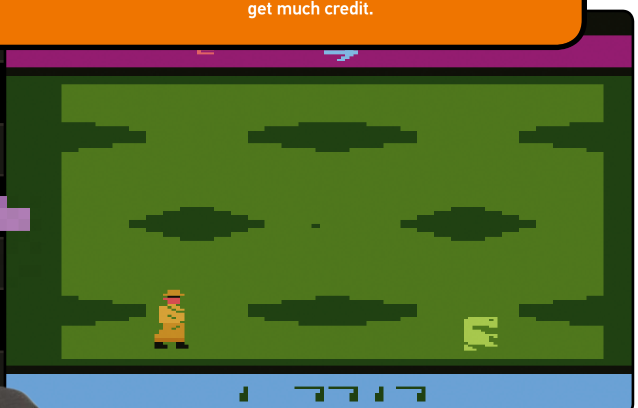
How did creating 2600 art compare to designing visuals for other systems?
I worked on 5200 and arcade games as well, so when I was assigned a 2600 game I would kinda groan. At first, everything was established on graph paper, and it wasn't clear if art or animation would even work until the programmer coded it. Later on, artists used an emulator, so we had a pretty good idea how art would look on the system ahead of time, and that proved to have a dramatic improvement on the quality.

Was designing high-res 2600 graphics more rewarding?
Of course I preferred high-res visuals, but it was a real pain in the ass to make anything look good on that piece of shit. As we used to say, it was like trying to draw with a bar of soap and your hands tied behind your back. *Bugs Bunny* was a little better: it had more memory set aside for the art compared to other 2600 games I had worked on.

How did you feel after moving on from designing 2600 graphics?
I moved over to coin-op after the video game crash in the early Eighties and quickly got into 3D, so I was no longer doing much raster art. I didn't miss it at all. Polygons were cutting edge in the Eighties, and my passion was 3D.

How do you feel now about your time as a 2600 artist?
It was a lot of fun; I was in the right place at the right time. What bothers me a little is that when people refer to retro gaming they don't think of the 2600 anymore. People think of Nintendo or even Sega. It's not a big deal, but early games on the 2600 don't get much credit.

"The 2600 games themselves received more intense effort in development"
Rex Bradford



» [Atari 2600] Although it sold millions, overproduction of *E.T.* resulted in huge losses for Atari at the time.



▶ And *Stampede* showed what you could do if you paid attention to how to lay out your screen. I was studying them to get a sense for what was possible, and certainly *River Raid*. A lot of people were learning from one another. Then *Pitfall!* was the breakthrough game, but there were certainly many good ones that came out in the 1982 timeframe."

But while the 2600 hosted a wealth of great titles during 1982, it was far from the most advanced system available. Rex largely credits the 2600's success to the fact that its games punched above their weight. "Parker Brothers were working on the Intellivision at the same time, I remember it had superior graphics capability. Although it may not have been fantastic, by that era it was quite good. A lot of factors go in, but the 2600 games themselves received more intense effort in development. I think the focus of Activision had a big role in that, because they came out with some really good 2600 games early on that fired people up and created some momentum. There was a progression where the games just got better. It was an exciting time to be buying games as well as making them."

Despite its superior competition, Howard Scott Warshaw – a star among Atari's second wave of 2600 coders – produced a trio of million-selling 2600 games during this exciting period. "At the 2600's peak, I don't know if the other consoles were as distributed, because things were already kind of declining at that point," Howard reflects. "The other consoles were definitely better, but were they enormously better? The 2600 was the one that got the major distribution first. That gave it momentum; that's where most of the games were, the largest games library. The Commodore 64 and Intellivision were far more capable systems, but they also had a lot of operating system overheads. There were a number of things that interfered with them really being spectacular advances. When you looked at their games they didn't look that much more spectacular than 2600 games. So they didn't have that 'wow' impact, that's why I think there wasn't much of a threat. You look at *Yars' Revenge*, which was the first game that I did, I think I definitely saw some things in a new way or was able to produce a few things that were high-impact. Which was where I was coming from. I wanted something that was going to grab the eye and the attention, and then hopefully this fun spirit."

As 1982 drew to a close, however, two unexpected events loomed on the horizon that when combined would all but end 2600 game development: the announcement of a $1 billion dollar loss at Atari and the collapse of the entire US videogames market. Larry Kaplan blames Atari for these related events. "By the time I came back to Atari, Ray Kassar had started paying royalties. And so, Tod Frye got a dime a cartridge and made a million dollars. Howard Scott Warshaw made $2 million. But the 2600 was very limited in what it could do; *Pac-Man* was just something we never would have attempted at Activision. And then the whole thing with *E.T.* – that was just silly. Nobody in the world could do an original game from scratch in six weeks. And the *E.T.* movie wasn't much of a videogame concept, but I gave Howard credit to actually finish it. But *Pac-Man, E.T.*, Atari doubled the price of those things – it charged $40 instead of $20. To a large extent, that destroyed the industry. Videogames were done. Atari lost a billion dollars in 1982. You know, it went crazy. It had all these huge projects it was working on, but it missed the 2600, and making good games for it."

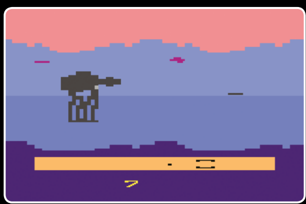
When asked about his 2600 *Pac-Man* port, Tod Frye is broadly philosophical, and takes the view that the game shouldn't shoulder too much blame



CLASSICS

PARKER BROTHERS

The licensing pioneer that played to the 2600's strengths

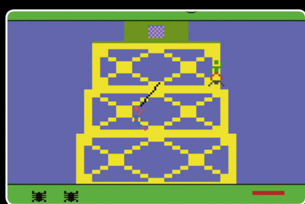


STAR WARS: THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK

■ Based on the *Star Wars* sequel's set-piece Battle Of Hoth scene, Parker's *Empire Strikes Back* puts the player in the pilot's seat of a snow speeder and pits them against an unstoppable fleet of imperial walkers. In terms of gameplay, *Empire* clearly takes influence from Williams' seminal coin-op *Defender*, but its focus on attacking one gigantic foe at a time instead. It's a great game that's still fun to play.

SPIDER-MAN

■ Although it borrows from the coin-op *Crazy Climber*, *Spider-Man* distinguishes itself by having Spidey web-spin rather than crawl up skyscrapers. Thugs appear at windows and try to cut the hero's webs, but swinging into them tops-up limited web-fluid supplies. The superhero's webbing is also replenished by defusing bombs set by the villainous Green Goblin, but the game's main appeal lies in trying not to fall and correcting falls by snagging buildings with a web as Spider-Man plummets to the ground.





FROGGER

■ One of the most fondly remembered Atari 2600 arcade conversions, Parkers Brothers' adaptation of the Konami smash-hit coin-op is about as accurate as 2600 owners could have possibly expected. In terms of concessions, *Frogger* on the 2600 has more rudimentary graphics than the original and lacks in-game music, but more importantly, Parkers' translation faithfully replicates the arcade classic's gameplay. The Atari 2600 port also offers long-term value with its frenetic 'Speedy Frogger' mode.

FROGGER II: THREEEDEEP

■ For its *Frogger* follow-up, Parker Brothers wisely chose to use the arcade original as the basis for three distinct stages featuring fresh visuals and mechanics. The trio of tweaked levels share the original game's objective of safely ascending the screen, but with tweaks to the specifics of how you achieve this goal. The first two stages play like expanded ocean-based versions of *Frogger*'s river and road sections, while stage three involves bouncing Frogger skyward into screen-top clouds.





for Atari's financial misfortunes or the US videogames crash of 1983. "I think the degree to which *Pac-Man* was responsible is exaggerated. I think if there was a factor it might have been something along the lines of disenchantment with videogames. I don't think that *Pac-Man* was anything more than a fellow traveller in that area, one of a whole trend of disillusionment. A lot of people really loved the game, but there was a momentum; the press hated the shit out of it. And then *E.T.* hot on its heels, which did not help – Howard was given like five weeks to make *E.T.* So the Atari brand was besmirched by 1983."

On *E.T.*, Howard Scott Warshaw explains the main problem with developing his 2600 movie adaptation in a little over a month, and on the crash, he recalls Atari's blinkered response to the 2600 games market imploding. "*E.T.* was really kinda proof of this: you can do a decent job of an initial design, but no good videogame goes from initial design to release. I don't think anyone really saw the crash coming. There wasn't a sense of impending doom, nobody expected things to reverse as quickly as they did. People had incredible denial over the idea that there *was* a crash. And the only thing Atari knew to do at this point was to sell 2600 games; that was their only money vehicle."

However great Atari's liability was, events outwith the firm's control were equally responsible for the decline of the 2600 games market. Rex Bradford reflects on how third-party 2600 development self-destructed in 1983. "If I'm remembering correctly, January of 1983 was when things started to go completely haywire. We were going to consumer electronics shows, and there were so many third-party companies with games. It was *Custer's Revenge* – all these crazy games. It was insane. Later, some of us left Parker to join ▶



THE CODER / DESIGNER

Developer Howard Scott Warshaw remembers the 2600



What was your earliest encounter with the 2600?

Well I first came to the 2600 when I started working at Atari. I hadn't really been getting into videogames that much at that point. When I saw the 2600, and started to see the games, I just thought: 'This is kinda cool!' I was a huge fan of television, and I just thought this was a great thing to do with television.

Why do you think that early 2600 titles weren't more original?

Quite simply, creativity is a tough thing. There's also a fundamental rule that the first thing anyone does in any new medium is recreate everything that's been done in past media. Prior home games were ridiculously elemental, but arcade games had variety and potential, and so it made sense to recreate those. Also, it was a prior identification thing and became almost the dominant mode of marketing.

How did you feel when you moved on from the 2600?

When Atari fell apart, there wasn't another place to go to do the 2600. Also, I was kinda burnt out. My experience at Atari was so intense, so remarkable, that I really needed some rest. I knew that was the end of a way of being that was absolutely life changing and so profoundly positive, validating and indulgent – and that was a loss.

How did developing games for the 2600 and other consoles actually compare?

I was still on the 2600 when things died at Atari. At the next gaming company I did, we were doing games on the PlayStation and PS2. The 2600 was one of the last platforms where you had an individual developer, and that's one of the biggest differences. But it just got bigger and bigger as the consoles got later and later – so those became collaborative works.

Why was the 2600 commercially viable for so long?

The decade after its release, the mass market had left the 2600, but 2600s were still there. The game prices had dropped substantially, but there was still a market. By the late Eighties, there weren't many systems you could make a game on yourself. For most systems, you needed a team and a tremendous amount of money to make a game. So the economics of the 2600 still worked.



CLASSICS

SEGA

The coin-op giant that brought arcade hits to the 2600

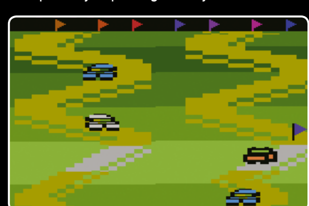


SPY HUNTER

■ Developed in the US by Sega Electronics, the 2600 *Spy Hunter* nails the coin-op's speed and gameplay while making very few concessions. Jeff Lorenz's adaptation of Midway's top-down vehicle shooter squeezes in the original's main road and river sections, its hostile vehicles – including the helicopter – plus the oil slick, smoke screen and missile power-ups. These are triggered by the second controller's fire button, but given the game's overall quality this is a tolerable workaround.

UP'N DOWN

■ Although hardly an arcade sensation, Sega's isometric obstacle course racer received quite a few conversions. The game's objective is to steer a VW Beetle through a maze of intersecting roads, collecting flags and either leaping over or onto obstructive traffic. Sega outsourced the 2600 version to US developer Steve Beck, and although Steve's port doesn't accurately replicate the arcade title's high-res multicoloured visuals, it captures its bump-and-jump design nicely.





TAPPER

■ A by-product of Sega's distribution relationship with Midway, the 2600 conversion of *Tapper* was ably developed by Steve Beck. As with Steve's 2600 *Up'n Down*, 2600 *Tapper* faithfully translates the mechanics of its arcade counterpart, but unlike *Up'n Down*, Steve's *Tapper* has nicely rendered high-resolution graphics. More impressively, sliding pints down its bars to customers is as compelling a prospect as it is in the coin-op, and the 2600 port reproduces four of the arcade game's five levels.

THUNDERGROUND

■ Technically a 2600 exclusive, except Jeff Lorenz's *Thunderground* is pretty much a conversion of the second stage of Sega's coin-op *Borderline*. Besides concessions to the top-down arcade game's visuals, *Thunderground* also swaps the original's enemy jeeps for tanks, but in gameplay terms it plays almost identically to *Borderline*'s level two. Besides blasting tanks and digging through terrain *Dig Dug*-style, the game's tricky core objective is to destroy six nuclear bases per stage.



Activision. And so in 1983, I was working on a game called *Kabobber.* That was how I experienced the crash. Activision at that time had about 60 titles in development. The word came down that they were going to publish only, like, five of them because of the market. Mine didn't make the cut. It did seem like an unexpectedly swift decline; one year was white-hot, then the next year the whole thing was in collapse. There were a lot of factors for the decline – including the flood of lousy games, but part of the story is that people really did peak out what you could do with the 2600 by 1983. The games were also expensive."

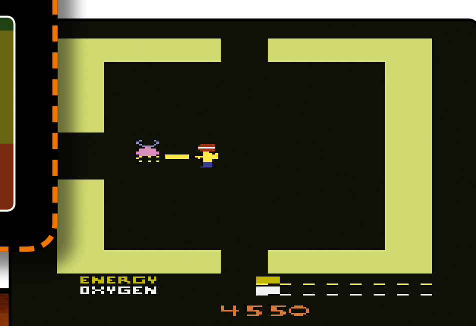
On the collapse of the 2600 games sector – and the US console market as a whole – David Crane traces events back to the formation of Activision, the firm's success as a third-party developer and the fate of those that followed its lead. "By showing that there was a viable third-party videogame business, Activision – and later Imagic – helped to cause the videogame crash. We had trade shows – CES – every six months. In one six-month period, 30 new companies showed up trying to follow in Activision's footsteps. Each got a couple of million dollars of VC money, and they designed and built game cartridges. Those companies all failed, and flooded

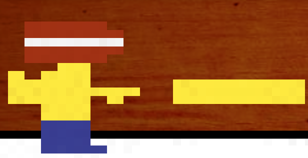


» [Atari 2600] *River Raid*'s success on the 2600 led to it being ported to many other systems.

the market with games at bankruptcy, fire-sale prices. That Christmas, over 20 million game cartridges were in bargain bins at the front of toy stores. Dad, bringing $40 in to buy his kid the latest Activision or Atari game on his Christmas list, stopped at the bargain bin and bought eight games at $5 each rather than the new game his kid asked for. Not until all 20 million bargain games sold through would new, high-quality games sell. That put a lot of companies out of business, causing the shutdown of Imagic and almost destroying Activision."

Following the fall of the 2600, Atari itself entered a downward spiral. In early-1983, a newly appointed CEO cut the firm's staff by 80 per cent, and then in 1984, Atari was sold to Commodore founder Jack Tramiel, who reduced Atari's employee count by a further 90 per cent. Jack's intension was to create a 16-bit computer, but he needed funds, and so in late-1985, he hired Mike Katz to market an inexpensive, cost-reduced 2600. "Jack Tramiel had bought Atari for debt from Warner," Mike recollects, "and he approached me to try to resurrect it. Our opportunity for the 2600 was to come out with as low a price version as possible, with the least expensive software. We had a very good commercial, which had the jingle, 'Under $50.' Everything we did in marketing was intended to be not extravagant, but fit the bill of creating awareness that Atari was back."







THE ATARI GAMES BOSS

Ex-Atari Games boss Mike Katz on the 2600's revival



What was your earliest encounter with the 2600, and what are your earliest memories of the system?

The 2600 was a phenomenal success. I was in Mattel from 1975 to 1979 working in new product categories, and I was always impressed when a new product came out that filled a need or was something totally new. I thought a home videogame system that allowed you to play arcade hits – more modestly – was a great idea. So my hat was off to Nolan Bushnell and Atari.

What attracted you to running Atari's videogames division?

I liked turnarounds. We started the handhelds at Mattel, which led to the Intellivision. Coleco was almost bankrupt and succeeded [partly] thanks to ColecoVision. I was hired by Epyx, and we made it profitable, but I wanted to get back into hardware. So I was approached by Jack Tramiel. He wanted to rejuvenate the 2600 and the 7800, and he asked if I'd run Atari's videogames division.

How did you make the 2600 competitive against the NES?

There were people who couldn't afford $120 for a games system and $29 for software – that's what the price of Nintendo was. So we reduced the cost and size of the 2600 and introduced it at $49.95 with cartridges under $15. It provided a lot of sales and profits. But everything for Jack was strictly low budget, so we had to be extremely imaginative – we even shot our own commercials on videotape.

Why was the 'Atari Software Development Group' set up?

There was a guy called Larry Siegel. Jack loved him, and he claimed that he could put together a development group and solve the problem of not having software for the 2600 and the 7800. So he got funding from Jack for an independent development group, out of Chicago, which worked on games. They didn't succeed, but they were trying, I guess.

What would you attribute the 2600's long-term popularity to?

It had the hot arcade games of the times – *Pac-Man*, especially. And it was inexpensive compared to the newer games systems that came out. In the last five to ten years, whoever has the rights has reintroduced them at a low of $19.95 with games built in. It's all about nostalgia, and it's about being able to pay very little for a lot of fun and enjoyment.

> **"Many people claim that 2600 games are still more fun to play than any modern game"**
> David Crane

By early- 1986, however, the gaming landscape had changed dramatically from the 2600's 1982 peak, which made it challenging for Mike to facilitate in-house and third-party games for the system. "It was difficult to get any new developers to develop for the 2600 because they wanted to make money and the capabilities of the machine were limited. We couldn't get the conversion rights for the hot coin-op games because Nintendo had a lock on through their relationships with the Japanese coin-op manufacturers. So these were problems, but I'd just come from the computer game company Epyx, and it occurred to me that the awareness that arcade games had generated in the past for home systems might be gotten by going after the bestselling computer games. So I went to people I knew from the industry to see if we could get them to do titles for the 2600 based on computer games. I thought it was a good strategy, but Jack was not willing to put money behind our own development nor was he willing to put it behind marketing."

However, by 1987, Mike's strategy was paying dividends. Tod Frye was working for Epyx at the time, and remembers the thinking behind porting computer classics, such as *Summer Games,* to the 2600. "Epyx had these Commodore 64 games, and was going horizontal with them out to the other platforms. At the time, the thinking was still that there were a lot of 2600 machines in people's living rooms. While technology had moved ahead, we knew a lot more programming tricks for the 2600, so you could actually make a pretty good game without banging your head against the wall."

By publishing titles on the Atari label and encouraging third-party development, Mike Katz managed to buoy the 2600 games market throughout 1988. By the following year, however, Atari was all but alone in developing for the system. Tod Frye found himself employed by Atari founder Nolan Bushnell's firm Axlon in 1989, and he explains how Nolan struck a deal to design 2600 games for Atari. "Atari still had some not-insignificant number of 2600 units, and basically Nolan said: 'We've got great ideas, and they will breathe enough life into the 2600 market to flush the last few million units out of the warehouse.' I think Nolan just needed a job, but he did actually have the chops to put together this package of game concepts that Jack Tramiel would buy for the 2600 in 1989."

Atari's last 2600 games trickled out in 1990, and the system's final commercial release appeared in 1992. Looking back, Tod Frye credits the console's long lifespan to its constantly evolving games. "I think the 2600 lasted so long because the games kept getting better, because the designers and the programmers kept being able to eke more out of it."

Commenting on the contemporary 2600 homebrew scene, Howard Scott Warshaw identifies the system's challenging architecture as its ongoing attraction. "People are still making 2600 games. Their games aren't really commercially viable; they're not making a shitload of money with them, but it's about the challenge. There is something really kind of magical about meeting that challenge."



» [Atari 2600] Larry Miller's *Enduro* is seen as one of, if not *the* best, racers on the 2600.

Given the final word on Atari's pioneering console on its 40th anniversary, David Crane singles out the creativity of 2600 coders and the fun provided by their games. "Many people claim that 2600 games are still more fun to play than any modern game. If true, that is due to versatile hardware and creative game designers. The 2600 both pioneered and embodied that wondrous time in history." *

Thanks to Larry Kaplan, David Crane, Warren Robinett, Rex Bradford, Howard Scott Warshaw, Tod Frye, Mike Katz and Alan Murphy.

Minority Report

INTERESTING GAMES YOU'VE NEVER PLAYED





PLAYSTATION SIMPLE 1500 SERIES

No, there weren't 1,500 games in the Simple series of budget-priced games, but there were some titles worth your time. Johnny Dimaline is your guide into the best of this often-overlooked range



» [PlayStation] Different arenas can set different moods. There's a comfy little dojo, and to contrast, there's this spooky nighttime riverbank.



» [PlayStation] If you happen to be Japanese-literate, there's reams of classic sports anime-esque story to get through in single-player mode.

VOL 99: THE KENDOU KEN NO HANAMICHI

■ DEVELOPER: **AMEDIO** ■ YEAR: **2002**

■ **Considering how it's one of Japan's traditional sports, and taking into account its simple, precise nature, you'd think there'd be at least as many videogames about kendo as there are about sumo wrestling.** In actual fact, though, you can count the number of dedicated kendo games on a single hand and still be left with one finger left over, and one of those games is mostly a platformer. In fact, to the best of our knowledge, this Japan-only budget PlayStation release is the only kendo game released in the 21st century! Kendo, for those who are unfamiliar, is a sport descended from sword training techniques in which competitors swing at each other and attempt to block blows with wooden swords, scoring points for successful hits.

Bearing in mind the fact that both its genremates were released on 8-bit systems in the Eighties, *Ken No Hanamichi* doesn't really have any contemporary competition to compare it to, though it does borrow heavily from arcade fighting games in its structure, having a single-player story mode, a survival mode and a versus mode. The story mode, as far as we can tell being unable to read Japanese, is a fairly down-to-earth affair: you play as a clean-cut young man training and competing in kendo tournaments. There are two other stories we're yet to unlock, however, which apparently cast a policewoman and a zombie in the starring roles, respectively. You play a match, there's a bunch of dialogue text and character portraits, you know the deal.

Survival mode is a little bit more interesting in terms of games design: since this isn't a fighting game, but a simulation of a sport based on points, in survival mode you face off against an endless stream of generic opponents in matches that end in a single point. You're allowed to lose five rounds before getting a game over, though the game only counts victories towards your survival score.

Versus mode is pretty much exactly as you expect, too. You can choose how many points each match goes up to, though one-point matches are definitely not recommended, since you'll end up spending more time in loading screens than you do actually playing the game. There's a whole bunch of characters to unlock, too, though as



they're all masked and there's no special moves,the only differences between them as far as we can tell are their heights and the colours of their outfits. There might be slight differences in their reaction times too, though if there are we haven't been able to notice them, and from a game balancing perspective what kind of advantage could you give to slower characters in a situation where there's no damage and all hits are created equal?

Ken no Hanamichi is a game that's peerless, though in this case it just means that it's running in a one-horse race. It's a great game, and it's definitely something to seek out if you're looking for something a little more calm and contemplative than pretty much every other game about combat sports.

IF YOU LIKE THIS TRY...

CHAMPION KENDO

SG-1000, 1986



■ From all the way back in 1986, this is a simple game of five-on-five team battles. Though it's a lot simpler visually, Sega's charming antique mostly plays a lot like *Ken No Hanamichi*. Though since they're both close interpretations of the same sport, that's to be expected.

MUSASHI NO KEN

FAMICOM, 1986



■ Also from 1986 comes this tie-in to a TV anime. Alternating between platform stages where your character trains in the woods and kendo tournament boss battles, this is a game that generally feels very wholesome.

BUSHIDO BLADE

PLAYSTATION, 1997



■ Though it's more violent, owing to its samurai setting, Squaresoft's classic slasher is probably the closest thing you're going to get to another kendo game. This is thanks to its realism, and fights that can end instantly, assuming you can hit your opponent in just the right way.

IN DEPTH



GETTING THE POINT

■ A point counter is displayed where you'd expect a typical fighting game life bar to be. Each marker represents a good clean whack on your opponent.

MAKING GOOD TIME

■ With fights being over in only two hits, the inclusion of a time limit might seem wasteful. Skilled players, however, could be blocking and countering all night without it.

THE BIG STAGE

■ Making a combat sports game on a tight budget has its advantages. For example, you can set a lot of fights in story mode in identical-looking arenas, like the one featured here.

BEHIND THE MASK

■ Though all the character models are pretty much the same masked fighter, every opponent you face has their own cartoony portrait up there in the corner.

Minority Report

VOL 35: **THE SHOOTING**

■ PUBLISHER: **CII** ■ YEAR: **2000**

■ Sometimes, a generic-looking title in the *Simple* series might actually be an exciting and original hidden gem of its genre, and to the untrained eye, *The Shooting* is one such gem. For those with a little more experience, however, it's almost as generic as can be, being something like the videogame equivalent of a band-for-hire that'll play any request you ask of them.

The Simple 1500 Series Volume 35: The Shooting is, essentially a collection of ideas, both aesthetic and mechanical, from other, more popular and well-known shooting games of the 32-bit era, but done with just a little less style, polish and competence.

For example, the first stage is a futuristic cityscape that looks and feels like the straight-to-DVD mockbuster version of the first stage from Square's *Einhander*, and it's quickly followed by an ocean stage that shamelessly cribs from both Taito's *G-Darius* and Technosoft's *Thunderforce V*. Technosoft's slightly unsung classic is probably the biggest visual influence of all on this game, since it also provides the look of the player's HUD, the font that most of the text and numbers are in, the combined target/health indicator for larger enemies, plus the general look and feel of the player's weaponry.

Of course, all this shameless audacity doesn't necessarily result in a bad game. In fact, since all the games it steals from are pretty great, and it pays to steal from the best, *The Shooting* ends up being a fun, though somewhat soulless, bit of budget blasting. And even now, when both shooting games and the more cultish entries into *Simple Series* games fetch hefty prices, *The Shooting* can be had for a pittance.





» [PlayStation] This underwater section is almost a cover version of part of *Thunderforce V* and even ends with a similar boss fight atop the waves.



» [PlayStation] The first stage sees you flying through a futuristic cityscape. A lot like the start of *Einhander*, but with less neon, and more grey.

MORE GAMES TO PLAY



» VOL 14: **THE BLOCK KUZUSHI**

■ DEVELOPER: **TAMSOFT**
■ YEAR: **1999**

■ You might not know this, but the original PlayStation plays host to some of the best *Arkanoid* clones of all time. Unfortunately, next to the likes of *Puchi Charat* and *Prism Land Story*, *The Block Kuzushi* only looks generic. It's not a bad game, it's simply one that's entirely unremarkable. The only thing that stands out is the odd ball physics, which have a slightly more realistic take on gravity than most games in the genre.



» VOL 22: **THE PRO WRESTLING**

■ DEVELOPER: **YUKES**
■ YEAR: **1999**

■ From the same developer as the first few *WWF Smackdown* games this game is basically a prototype for those better-known releases, featuring many of the same animations and so on, though they're applied to generic fictional wrestlers here, competing in a smaller range of match types and with less extravagant presentation. It might still be worth checking out for fans of that series though, as an interesting developmental curiosity.



» VOL 33: **THE BOXING**

■ DEVELOPER: **NEKOGUMI**
■ YEAR: **2000**

■ A simple boxing game featuring a series of big-headed fighters boxing in a dimly-lit arena that's reminiscent of an old working men's club. There's nothing too fancy mechanically, either: other than each character having one fighting game-esque special punch, you just use the d-pad to move and a button each for punching and blocking. It's a bit of fun, but probably not as realistic or sportsmanlike as most boxing fans would like.



» VOL 63: **THE GUN SHOOTING 2**

■ DEVELOPER: **AMS**
■ YEAR: **2001**

■ With such a butch-sounding title, you might be expecting some kind of assassination game, or maybe an old-west quick-draw gunfight type situation. On the contrary, what you actually get here is a series of *Point Blank*-style lightgun minigames, all framed with a story about some cute anime girls who seem to be exploring some kind of magic library inhabited by talking animals. It's very easy, but a nice little distraction.

VOL 100: THE UCHUU HIKOUSHI

■ DEVELOPER: AMEDIO ■ YEAR: 2002

■ **The phrase 'Uchuu Hikoushi' translates to 'Astronaut', and that's pretty much what this game is: an astronaut simulator.** Well, 'simulator' might be a bit much, but it's a game where you don a big clunky spacesuit and slowly meander around various extraterrestrial locales performing vaguely realistic tasks like maintaining machinery or finding particular space rocks and, as far as we can tell, no aliens, hostile or otherwise. Though the painfully slow movement of you spacesuit would make any kind of combat pretty much impossible anyway.

Other than the unique setting, there's a lot of features that will feel pretty familiar to anyone who's played a few low-budget action games. You're equipped with a jet pack that has a slowly-cooling overheat meter, and if you fill it all the way, you're stuck on the ground until it's completely cooled down. There's also an equipment shop, where you can buy incremental upgrades to every part of your spacesuit (as you get paid by the mission, we guess you're some kind of freelance astronaut, rather than a public employee). And like most other low budget action games of this type, *The Uchuu Hikoushi* is a mildly entertaining, inoffensive way to while away an hour or two, and it's another game by developer Amedio with somewhat unique subject matter.



» [PlayStation] As you might expect, walking into that nearby lava isn't going to help the survival chances of your astronaut.

RETRO STINKER

» VOL 11: THE PINBALL 3D

■ DEVELOPER: NEKOGUMI ■ YEAR: 1999

■ Despite the title, this game's selection of tables are as flat as they are boring and lifeless. The PlayStation might not be a strong system for pinball games, but you can still do better than this.



» VOL 66: THE KAITEN: MAWASUNDA!!

■ DEVELOPER: TAITO
■ YEAR: 2001

■ One for fans of *Bishi Bashi Special* and *WarioWare*, this one's a collection of short minigames that all revolve around the theme of turning (pun intended). The games range from skateboarding and cooking, to weirder stuff like robot weightlifting and even a stage of the arcade classic *Cameltry*. Every one of the games can be played two-player, too, so it might be worth a look if you want something more offbeat than a fighting game.



» VOL 76: THE DODGEBALL

■ DEVELOPER: ACCESS
■ YEAR: 2001

■ Eschewing the health bars, special moves and other extravagances typical of the genre, this game takes a more realistic approach to the playground sport, in which players are knocked out with one hit. This is actually into account, too, as the timing on catching the ball is very forgiving. As such, the AI opponents are very difficult to hit. It's a unique take on the sport, but it does make things seem a little less exciting.



» VOL 86: THE ONIGOKKO

■ DEVELOPER: SOL/BESTMEDIA
■ YEAR: 2002

■ One of the more original concepts in the series, in a way that you can't believe it's never been done before or since: a collection of old-fashioned children's playground games, like tig, rock paper scissors, racing down the street, and so on. You pick a kid and join in the fun, hammering a button *Track & Field*-style to run faster. A nostalgic game that makes you wonder why there's never been any sort of UK or US equivalent.



» VOL 94: THE CAMERAMAN

■ DEVELOPER: TOMCAT SYSTEM
■ YEAR: 2002

■ An enhanced port of the PC Engine game *Gekisha Boy*, this title sees you as a spineless newspaper photographer, walking the streets looking for stories to snap, be they UFOs, crimes, giant monsters, street fights, or just people falling over. It's by no means classic, but its ugly visual style reminiscent of old Soviet bloc cartoons has its own charm, and trying to hit the score quota on each stage can be addictive.



F*!#ING CONKER!

THE MAKING OF BAD FUR DAY AND LIVE & RELOADED



BACK IN THE GOLDEN ERA OF 3D PLATFORMERS, ONE IDIOTIC LITTLE SQUIRREL REIGNED SUPREME...LY DRUNK. IAN DRANSFIELD SPOKE WITH CONKER'S CREATOR TO RELOAD A BAD FUR DAY

How different it all could have been in Conker the squirrel's life. He might have come to be known to us as a foul-mouthed alcoholic rat of the trees, but the ginger drunkard's actual debut in gaming was behind the wheel in *Diddy Kong Racing*, before showing up clean cut and worried his birthday party might be ruined by a giant acorn (no, really) in Game Boy Color title *Conker's Pocket Tales*. Safe to say, somewhere along the way Conker hit a few bumps in the road, and his life took a turn for the… more expletive-ridden, let's say.

But it wasn't intended to be that way. Rare had made strides into developing *Twelve Tales: Conker* – a more standard three-dimensional platformer that fit in well with what the studio had been pumping out in recent years. That very fact ended up being the genesis of *Conker*, as fans reacted with boredom to the idea of yet another cutesy-cutesy game from Rare. *Banjo-Kazooie* was out there and its team was already at work on *Donkey Kong 64*, while it was, in the most part, the *Killer Instinct* team working on *Conker*. The switch from cutesy to ultraviolent arrived with consummate ease.



» [N64] the loveable little scamp is always breaking the fourth wall.

"The *Donkey Kong* lot were the golden boys, and I don't think much was expected of the outcasts in the other barn… I'm being a bit facetious, of course, but it serves to illustrate the state of play at that moment," says Chris Seavor, creator of *Conker* – as well as vocal talent behind all male characters in *Bad Fur Day* barring one particular singing lump of poo. "*Twelve Tales*," he continued, "even though it was more similar to *Mario 64* in terms of tone than [cancelled Rare RPG] *Project Dream* initially, was the one that had to change after *Banjo-Kazooie* became a thing. Having two cutesy first-party 3D platformers coming out at the same time on the same console was questionable, but from the *same* studio wasn't an option. *Banjo* was Tim Stamper's baby, so *Twelve Tales* had to go – certainly in the form it was in."



"Banjo was Tim Stamper's baby, so Twelve Tales had to go"

Chris Seavor

But the foul-mouthed superstar's turn under, of all things, the Nintendo banner wasn't just a case of two cutesy platformers at once – it was a logistical decision, too. "*Banjo* looked more likely to get done," Chris said, "And to be honest they'd sailed past us content and graphics-wise, while the *Twelve Tales* team had fought among themselves. In the end, it was a simple matter of change or die… so we changed."

That change certainly wasn't to something you would associate naturally with Nintendo, but Chris and the team at Rare was trusted enough thanks to recent successes to just get on with things. Aside from the odd snide comment and some perceived mistrust on the Nintendo Of America side of things, development of the mature-rated, swearing-heavy *Bad Fur Day* went ahead with little to no corporate interference. This meant that the two-year development period – much shorter than the perceived time it took, thanks to the initial work on (and scrapping of) *Twelve Tales* – was relatively smooth and lacking in any major hurdles from beginning to end. Which isn't exactly the sort of story you'd think to associate with such an anarchic, chaotic game as *Conker's Bad Fur Day*, but there you go.

As development moved from a traditional cutesy title to one featuring sex and booze and copious cursing, you'd be forgiven for thinking the main character would move away from being an anthropomorphised rodent. But no: "That was one of the few things that carried over from *Twelve Tales*," Chris explains, "Where the squirreliness of Conker had more relevance. Indeed his initial movement style was on four legs, jumping from point to point very much like his real-world counterpart. Generally though, it's as good a cutesy character as any – in fact, if you looked at the character design from *Twelve Tales*, he became a lot more cutesy in *Bad Fur Day*, which juxtaposed nicely with the actual tone of the game. He'd also been trademarked, which ain't cheap."



» [N64] Colourful characters such as Gregg The Grim Reaper added plenty of personality to *Conker's Bad Fur Day*.

To set *Bad Fur Day* apart from its contemporaries – not least of which those from Rare itself – Chris and the team added a few unique characteristics to the game. Vocal talents being provided in the most part by the game's creator helped to keep a consistent (low) ▶

The Parodies of Conker

No movie was safe from the squirrel's lampooning

A Clockwork Orange

■ This opening scene is shot for shot taken from *A Clockwork Orange* – a sign the devs wanted us to know, from the very opening scene, what sort of thing we were in for.





Saving Private Ryan

■ Not only is this section one of the more obvious homages, it's also one of the best – a lot of work clearly went into making the horrors of war come alive for… a squirrel.

The Matrix

■ When *Conker* arrived in 2001, *The Matrix* was a cultural touchstone – not so much by *Live & Reloaded*'s time, though. Still, it makes for a pretty cool set-piece.





Jaws

■ Rare might have craftily disguised the shark as a shark-dog hybrid, but we see through that ruse. No, this is pure *Jaws* – even featuring similar music cues.

Dracula

■ Conker's naivety knows no bounds, and this stretches to stepping over the boundary into a grand old mansion occupied by a bequiffed, floating vampire.



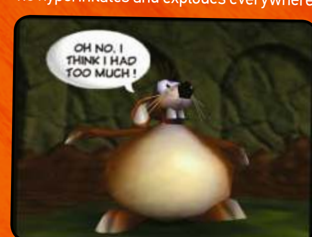


Aliens

■ When you don't know how else to finish a game, why not pull an *Alien* swerve? Bad guy's chest explodes, you get a powersuit, a huge fight takes place – game over, man.

Monty Python's The Meaning of Life

■ Marvin asks you to bring him more and more cheese. Until, just like Mr Creosote, he hyperinflates and explodes everywhere.





Terminator

■ As well as references to *The Terminator* in the original, the unmade *Conker* sequel was meant to feature Berri returning as a robotic murder machine.





» [N64] Conker's first ever appearance was as a part of the *Diddy Kong Racing* line-up. And, no, he did not swear.



» This piece of concept art stands as an example of the excellent artistry that Rare offers.

tone, while the free rein offered by Rare and Nintendo meant your usual closed off in-game world was opened up for the real one to encroach. To say *Conker's Bad Fur Day* featured references would be like saying the opening scene in *Saving Private Ryan* is a smidge unsettling. Fittingly enough, the Saving Private Rodent scene in *Conker's Bad Fur Day* is just as harrowing as its inspiration – and with good reason, as Chris explains: "The amount of work that went into that whole set-piece was a game's worth in itself." Sadly, we never were able to see the Harry 'Abraca-fucking-dabra' Potter parody Chris wanted to introduce in *Bad Fur Day*'s sequel.

But this wasn't just japes and jokery at the expense of popular culture – a game was being made and technical challenges had to be overcome. For Chris, it was (apparently) simple things like fitting all of *Bad Fur Day* into the N64's relatively paltry memory – especially when Rare's own *Donkey Kong 64* and *Perfect Dark* both required the additional RAM pack in order to run properly. "We used full speech as well," Chris says, "and that shit ain't cheap! The Coders used some form of dark magic I reckon, which they still won't admit to."

Chris himself didn't work on the coding side of things, so his personal challenges from the time working on *Bad Fur Day* were more focused on making the narrative side of things mesh with the mechanical side. "Just doing a 'thing' like hitting something with a brick is far more engaging if there's a motivation behind it to disguise the binary nature of the act," he explains, "There's no greater disappointment in any game than the moment the illusion of immersion drops, and all that's left is little more than a chart and some numbers. To be a good designer – for me – has always been the ability to be the person behind the curtain who, right to the very end credits, you pay no attention to."

With that design responsibility comes the need to cut, of course, and *Conker*'s original cut for N64 was around 20 per cent bigger than what ended up in shops. While mostly designs and ideas just on paper, Hell and Gregg had their own expanded sections, the prune-filled battle with the bull was more extensive,

KEY CHARACTERS

The foul, grotesque and downright stupid creatures that Conker has to offer



CONKER

■ Once nice, now a bit of an oik, Conker first appeared in *Diddy Kong Racing* and *Conker's Pocket Tales* before his starmaking turns in *Bad Fur Day* and *Live & Reloaded*. After disappearing for a while, he reappeared as part of the Project Spark and HoloLens lineups, before once again fading into obscurity. Today, he is probably drunk somewhere, swearing at an empty chair.



THE GREAT & MIGHTY POO

■ Well, here he is, in all his shitty glory. The only character that was not voiced by Chris Seavor, The Great & Mighty Poo is an opera-singing, sweetcorn-loving piece of crap. Literally. One of Conker's most infamous characters – and moments – it's something that has stuck with players almost 20 years now. Kind of like a bad smell.



BERRI

■ Conker's beau and, eventually, driving force behind the ginger hero's journey, Berri actually ends up both dead and forgotten at the end of *Bad Fur Day*. It's her ever-reliable boyfriend who forgets to actually request that she is brought back from the dead, meaning she's stood up, kidnapped and eventually murdered. That's a... well, *bad day*.

"It wasn't just some tagged-on, box-ticking exercise"

Chris Seavor

the inside of the windmill featured more character and storyline interactions, "Time was – and is – always the great enemy," Chris laments.

As if all of this wasn't being ambitious enough, Chris and his Rare colleagues decided they wanted to bring something else to *Bad Fur Day* that people probably wouldn't be expecting – multiplayer. "I had some ideas I thought might be fun that would only really work with multiplayer," Chris says. "Plus it was becoming a staple thing with games at the time. I was also playing lots of first-person shooters online at the time and thought it could be interesting territory for future games. A place to experiment and get the tech going, so to speak," he adds.

This experiment became a surprise hit for the N64 game, though it wouldn't reach its stride until a certain remake landed a few years later. *Bad Fur Day* with friends was a nice complimentary mode to the single-player story, allowing players to see characters working and interacting in a different way. "It wasn't just some tagged-on, box-ticking exercise," Chris says. "Plus, you get to pee on your friends virtually, which people might find fun. Maybe?"

C*onker's Bad Fur Day* went down very well on its release in 2001, surprising Nintendo and Rare's fans as much as it delighted them. The mix of diverse game mechanics, fully voiced characters, crass humour, movie and pop culture references, the Rare pedigree and a few other bits and pieces made for a ready made cult classic: too offensive to be up there with the *Mario 64*s of the world, but too good to be ignored or forgotten. Which is why it was little surprise when, after Microsoft picked up Rare in 2002, Conker made his comeback on the American company's console, the Xbox.

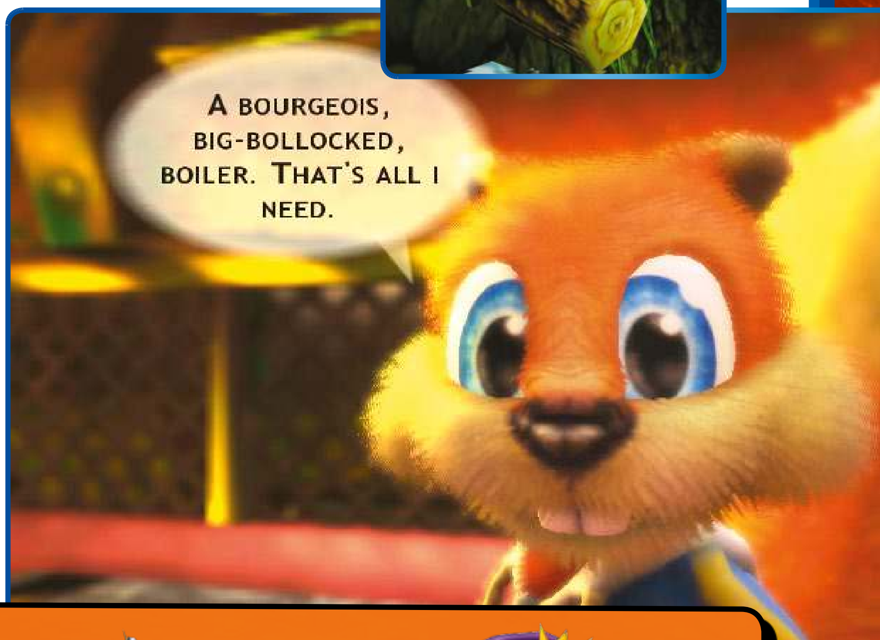
Rather than a hasty rerelease, *Conker Live & Reloaded* was a much more involved, deeper process of… well, starting again. "We started from scratch," Chris explains, "And I completely redesigned the multiplayer into things as a whole new game on top of that. So yeah, it was difficult."

And it was, quite fittingly, handled with a bit of minor subterfuge from Chris, who worried the team wouldn't buy into the prospect of creating so much over again after having, effectively, already worked on the game once before. "I did the Gandalf/Beorn trick and gradually introduced the new stuff as we developed (and as the team expanded). But right from the start, I knew what I wanted to do."

This approach was something still pretty new back in 2005, with high-def – or at least higher res – remakes not ten a penny like today. *Live & Reloaded* might not be able to take the award for being the first of these remakes, but it







» [Xbox] The Xbox version didn't censor everything – least of all very British swearing.



GREGG

■ The Grim Reaper is an entity we should all have a healthy fear and respect for, but it's pretty hard to conjure up any real level of terror or awe when he's a shortarse called Gregg. He's anything but intimidating and harbours a fear for cats, but other than that Gregg ends up being a fine ally for Conker the few times they encounter each another.



BIRDY

■ The next time you happen across a red-sweatshirt-clad scarecrow, remember to offer it some Mepsipax or a bottle of nut-brown ale – you never know, it might just be Birdy, an early-game ally of Conker and somewhat drunken, straw-filled crow botherer. He gives you the in-game manual, and is thus a hero to all people. And squirrels.



PANTHER KING

■ A short-tempered, sadistic king with a minor milk addiction who is hunting for a replacement table leg (a red squirrel will do the job). The Panther King is who you'd expect to fight at the end of the game, just like King K.Rool in *Donkey Kong Country*. K.Rool, however, managed to avoid having his chest explode everywhere before a fight could happen.



» [Xbox] As if to remind those reading that *Conker* was always about surprising levels of violence with such a cutesy aesthetic.



IMPROVING CONKER

How Rare made Bad Fur Day better for Live & Reloaded



FUR

■ Graphically, *Conker Live & Reloaded* took things up a notch in every area – higher resolution textures, better lighting, brighter colours. But it's the fur that really blew everyone away, with Conker himself getting one of the most impressive makeovers of anyone or anything in the whole game. He's just so… *fuzzy.*

TEAM FORTRESS CONKER

■ Multiplayer did make up a chunk of the N64 release, but by the time *Live & Reloaded* rolled around, Xbox Live had taken off. While Rare could have halfheartedly bolted on a perfunctory multiplayer mode, it instead crafted a *Team Fortress*-alike with surprising depth that established a healthy playerbase.





THE LOCAL TOUCH

■ For those who weren't yet privy to the world of online gaming through Xbox Live, Rare also saw fit to throw in some good old classic local multiplayer options. System link, co-op and PVP all made the cut and could be played by up to four people on the same TV, no need for any of that fancy pants internet stuff.

CENSORSHIP

■ A dash of censorship across the board for Conker's remake meant it was family friendly! Alright, it still wasn't. At all. And actually the censorship was a step in the wrong direction – the original had bleeps at times anyway, so it wasn't a new introduction, but the removal of some extra swearing was just a bit too nanny state for some.



"I liked the bleeps because they left things to your imagination"

Chris Seavor



» [Game Boy Color] This pixelly brat is none other than our hero Conker – no booze and no swearing here, though.

▶ certainly set a high standard in most regards, and – aside from the very odd 4/10 Eurogamer review – was well received by Xbox owners and *Conker* aficionados alike.

One sticking point for fans of the original, though, was the move to censor more of the game than first time around. While plenty of *Bad Fur Day* was bleeped and obscured from impressionable ears and eyes, *Live & Reloaded* cut out more of the swears – for many diminishing the shock factor of the initial release. One person not saddened by this move, though, was Chris himself: "Some of that was me," he admits, "I liked the bleeps because they left things to your imagination, and usually that's a lot worse than anything we could actually say. I've never really understood why people have a problem with some of the added bleeps – it was pretty minor."

An addition to *Live & Reloaded* that wasn't so minor, though, was that of multiplayer. While it had existed in *Bad Fur Day*, the power of Xbox Live and the explosion in popularity of online console gaming meant there was a ready made – and huge – market out there for a good ol' game of cutesy animals decapitating one another. For the second time in two releases, *Conker*'s multiplayer was better than it had any right to be, and Chris puts a big part of that down to Microsoft's online backbone. "Xbox Live was and is the best thing about the Xbox platform," he says, "They nailed it when they created that service so it would be rather churlish of me not to take advantage of it."

Take advantage Chris did, with *Live & Reloaded*'s multiplayer offering a number of different modes and *Team Fortress*-style character classes – each with different weapons, abilities and attributes. "I just dipped into the vast vista of multiplayer games I'd been playing over the previous five or so years," Chris explains, "Like *Team Fortress*, *Counter-Strike* and *PlanetSide* – and I extracted what I liked and left what I didn't. I think it worked well, and definitely kept the flavour of the world but also had a depth that meant people wouldn't play for five minutes and get bored… hopefully."



» [Xbox] The latter half of Conker concentrates on third-person shooting. It works surprisingly well.



Of course with such an undertaking – and such a focus on making it a mode actually worth playing – came a great deal of struggle for the development team. "Multiplayer map design is very, very difficult," Chris laughs. "It's difficult. It really is. I can't say any more than that. Oh wait, did I mention it's really difficult? It is. Everyone go and sit down with a blank piece of paper and a pencil and design a multiplayer map. You'll see what I mean." But it was, in the end, totally worth it – the multiplayer portion of *Live & Reloaded* saw a healthy population taking part in its ludicrous action for years after the game's release, and even after the release of the Xbox 360.

Conker: Live & Reloaded was a beautiful and surprisingly ambitious remake of a cult classic, but – and this was the same for *Bad Fur Day* – it didn't do too well in the all important sales department. Both games came out in the twilight of their respective consoles' lifespans, neither received a huge marketing push and both ended up beloved by those who played them, but in too few homes to make it viable to make any more games in the series. Two sequels – *Conker's Other Bad Day* and *Conker: Gettin' Medieval* – were cancelled. The squirrel had, finally, run out of those seemingly-endless lives he so enjoyed to abuse.

That was until 2014, when Conker returned to the fore at a number of Microsoft's presentations. What was initially believed to be a brand-new, full game featuring everyone's favourite furry little bastard was soon revealed to be a bitty, piece-by-piece release for the Xbox One's Project Spark user-generated content software-turned-game. While featuring some level of Conker's old attitude, it was heavily sanitised and appeared as little more than a corporate-approved showing of a cult favourite mascot. When Project Spark – and *Conker's Big Reunion*, as it was officially known – died a death, very few shed a tear.

Since then we've been twiddling our thumbs to see what else comes of the aspiring table leg – there's a 'Young Conker' demonstration for Microsoft's HoloLens, but a) it isn't Conker and b) it's something only developers and hardcore tech enthusiasts will play. Sadly, the return of our drunken pal does seem to be something we will never actually, really see – at least not under the watch of his current owners in Redmond.

One thing Microsoft should bear in mind, though, is that the series' creator is ready and willing to take up the helm for a third true *Conker* game: "I have my own little venture at the moment, Gory Detail – check us out – and our next game after *The Unlikely Legend Of Rusty Pup* is going to be a more traditional side-scrolling platformer/beat-'em-up with a twist," Chris explains, "For a laugh, though, our first placeholder asset is going to be a certain teenage (prequel) squirrel, just to wind the fans up! But if Microsoft wants to throw some cash at us to do it for real, well – never say never. Plus I know someone who can do a really good Conker voice." *

Thanks to Chris Seavor. Find him on Twitter @conkerhimself, while studio Gory Detail can be found at @GoryDetail and gory-detail.com. *The Unlikely Legend Of Rusty Pup* will be released… "some time this year", according to Chris.



» [Xbox] Fortunately squirrels have as many lives as they want to have, so says Gregg the Grim Reaper.



» More gorgeous preproduction artwork from the early stages of development.



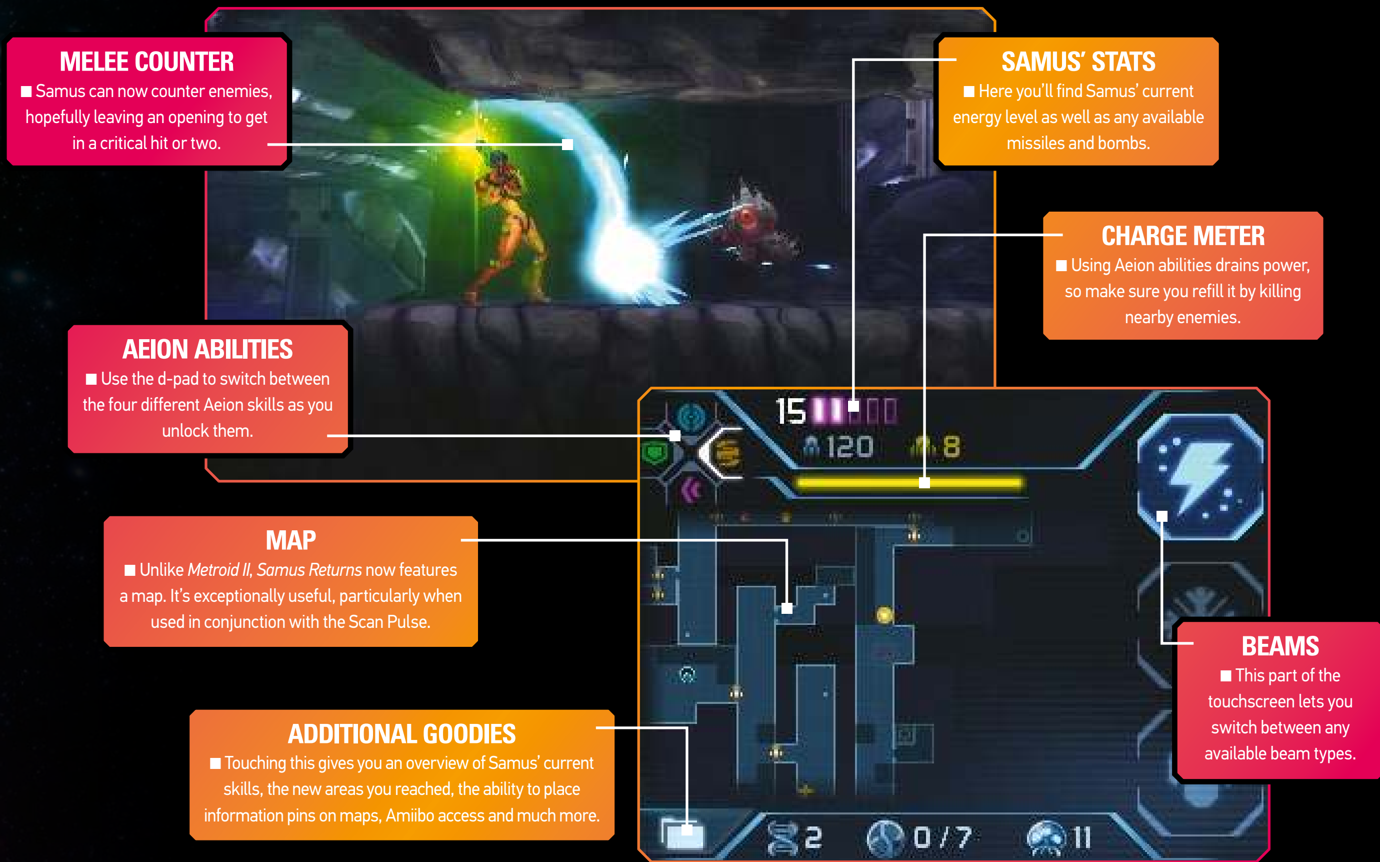
METROID
SAMUS RETURNS

How do you make a 26-year-old game relevant for a new generation? Darran Jones poses the question to Samus Returns' producer, Yoshio Sakamoto and codirector, Jose Luis Márquez



IMPROVING METROID II

How MercurySteam has reinvented the original Game Boy game



It can be a rocky rollercoaster ride if you're a fan of *Metroid*. It always appears to be one of the franchises that Nintendo gives the least attention to – likely because its sales come nowhere near the likes of *Mario* and *Zelda* – but its core games are usually worth the long waits.

2016, however, was not a good year for the many followers of Samus Aran. *Project AM2R*, an astonishingly good fan remake of *Metroid II: The Return Of Samus* was shut down by Nintendo just days after its developers released a demo to the public, causing wails of anguish from fans who were desperate for more Samus adventures. A short time afterwards those same fans were greeted with what's largely seen as the weakest game in the *Metroid* series, *Federation Force*.



» [3DS] MercurySteam has more than succeeded in portraying Samus as a no-nonsense badass.

Things were certainly not looking rosy for *Metroid*'s future – but the future has a habit of changing.

Just ten months after the release of *Federation Force*, Nintendo used its June 2017 Treehouse event to reveal not one, but two new *Metroid* games. The big news was the reveal of *Metroid Prime 4*, well at least the reveal of its title. It nevertheless sent fans reeling, but Nintendo had one more trick up its sleeve, a retelling of *Metroid II*, Samus' very first portable adventure, which would be heading to Nintendo's 3DS and would be released by the end of the year. So how did fans end up with two new games? Yoshio Sakamoto, who is serving as producer for the remake, *Samus Returns*, and has been involved with the series since the original NES game says it comes down to good timing. "We're constantly searching for the next *Metroid* game to develop," he says. "We ended up working on two games now simply because lots of different pieces happened to fall into place at the right time." He also pointed out that there's no connection between *AM2R* or the new game, revealing: "I've heard of it, but I've not played it. There is no connection."

Of course, this isn't the first time that Nintendo has used the 3DS to revitalise an older Nintendo game – *Fire Emblem Echoes* also came out this year – but unlike that game *Samus Returns* has been created by a different company, and even Sakamoto himself wasn't involved in its creation, so creating *Samus Returns* has been a little more difficult. "All games contain some message from the developer to the audience," he begins. "I wasn't a developer on the original *Metroid II*, so I needed to make sure I properly understood this message, to maintain the original quality of the game, while at the same time making it into something that can stand on its own as a new game. This endeavour to make the game as a homage to the original was an extremely novel experience for me during my time working on *Metroid* titles, and critical for the development of *Metroid: Samus Returns*."

For MercurySteam's Jose Luis Márquez, who acted as director on *Samus Returns* alongside Takehiko Hosokawa, his involvement began with that simplest of things – a phone call. "We had always publicly expressed our admiration for Nintendo and the special love we felt for the *Metroid* franchise," he explains when we asked him about MercurySteam's involvement with *Samus Returns*. "I don't know exactly how Nintendo knew about this desire, but the case is that it was heard and [it] reached the people who could make it possible. One day we received a call from them and now here we are."

Of course, that phone call does begin to make a lot more sense when you realise that MercurySteam was a developer that had not only proven its mettle when it came to working alongside big Japanese names – Hideo Kojima, no less – but that it was also quite capable of resurrecting a beloved gaming franchise, in this case, the *Castlevania* series. We're somewhat ▶



» [3DS] Samus' new laser sight goes red whenever you're locked on to an enemy. Just in case you didn't realise.

amazed that it's taken this long for the two developers to get together and we were keen to know what MercurySteam's secret was when it comes to looking after legacy franchises. "I would say that the most important thing to get right is to find a good balance to keep the spirit and respect the legacy of the franchise has while keeping an eye on modern standards and not forgetting about new audiences," notes Jose. It's a sentiment that Sakamoto is aware of, as he's been a custodian of the franchise for over 30 years. "I'm always aware of the responsibility," he says. "I believe that while focusing on meeting the expectations of our fans, it's important to do ones best to not be conservative and not get stuck in a rut."

Luckily for *Metroid* fans, being stuck in a rut is one thing that *Samus Returns* cannot be accused of. Unlike many remakes, *Samus Returns* is not a level-for-level reimagining of the original, although it's certainly inspired by it and the story and structure remain similar. The core concept is identical, so Samus is sent to SR388 to exterminate the Metroid threat once and for all. It's a tale of mass genocide that hasn't changed since the original storyline in 1991 so we were keen to know how much influence the Game Boy release had on Jose and his team. "I didn't play the original game during development," he tells us. "However, when I first heard about the chance to remake it, the first thing I did was to replay it again from beginning to end. I had played it many years ago but I wanted to relive the experience, capture the game's spirit and have it fresh in my mind before entering development."

"WE WANTED TO GREATLY IMPROVE THE ORIGINAL GAME"

Jose Luis Márquez



» [3DS] Returning to Samus' ship allows her to recharge all her energy and weapons.

Not constantly accessing the original game has certainly helped MercurySteam, as it's allowed *Samus Returns* to feel very much like its own game, rather than simply trading off what came before it. While many of the moves that Samus has access to will certainly be familiar to those that have played a *Metroid* game before, Jose and his team have added all sorts of new mechanics, which helps *Samus Returns* feel incredibly fresh, regardless of whether you're a fan of the original Game Boy release or just like playing adventure games. "We wanted to greatly improve the original game so this remake could be felt almost as a new game," explains Jose. "Regarding Samus' abilities, she is now able to free-aim at enemies, to perform a melee counter to defend herself from incoming enemy attacks (a movement that leads during boss fights to powerful, interactive grab sequences) and to make use of Aeion Energy to cast up to four different Aeion abilities that enhance navigation, combat, defence and exploration. We've also added other classic abilities from other games in the series that were not present in the original game, giving even new uses to some of them (like the Grapple Beam). As a result, of all of the above the level design of the original game has been greatly modified to accommodate all our gameplay needs: we've even added Teleport Stations to help players explore the intricate cave system of planet SR388. Regarding enemies and bosses, we've also made a massive overhaul both in their visual and gameplay designs. Finally, we've also added a new boss that was not present in the original title, either."

While the new mechanics spice things up, it doesn't mean that adding them was straightforward. It's tricky to find a suitable balance between the mechanics of old and taking a series or a game in a fresh new direction. "That was the biggest challenge we tackled though development," Jose confirms. "It was not an easy task to find the proper mechanics that worked best when built over the foundation of a classic *Metroid* experience. That said, we are very confident with the final result and we feel very happy about how smooth their integration has ended up blending with the existing core mechanics." Sakamoto is keen to point out as well that the general evolution of handhelds has also helped improve this new *Metroid* adventure. "I am always trying to make full use of the features of different hardware," he tells us. "The Nintendo 3DS is a handheld game device that's extremely suited to the *Metroid* platform, with its two screens and touchscreen features etc. In particular, I wanted to make good use of the stereoscopic 3D feature. I feel it turned out very well."





» [Game Boy] Purists argue that the original game is far more atmospheric, but it's something we disagree with.





» [3DS] A counter attack on a Metroid cuts to this scene where you can fill it with gunfire.

Sakamoto has a good point, as *Samus Returns* really does look fantastic on the 3DS. While we're confident that an enhanced Switch version of *Samus Returns* will be on the cards, it's going to lack the intensity that the 3DS game offers. MercurySteam did an exceptional job with its 3D work on *Castlevania: Lords Of Shadow – Mirror Of Fate* and it's done a similar job here, with real depth to the huge caverns that Samus explores and great cinematic cutscenes that show off the powerful Metroids she battles. And while we're on the subject of bosses, it's worth noting that the numerous Metroids that Samus fights aren't actually that far removed from those of the Game Boy version, meaning not all elements of the original game have been remade. "There will be no new types of Metroid other than those that appeared in the original", concludes Jose. "There are, however, stronger versions of some of them which are closer to its next evolution step. This allowed us to gradually increase the challenge and variety through the game while still remaining faithful to the Metroid evolution cycle proposed in the original game."

It sounds like a missed opportunity, but the Metroids remain challenging to battle against and unlike the original, exploration of your surroundings is far more important this time around. It's certainly a compromise, but it's a good one. We're also hoping that the deft work that MercurySteam has done on the game means that other developers will get the chance to create more games in the *Metroid* universe. One thing's for clear, though, as long as there's a voice for the adventures of Samus, new *Metroid* games will continue to get made. "I think it's because users spur us on," concludes Sakamoto when we ask him about the franchise's popularity. "It's clear that the reactions from fans have an influence on subsequent *Metroid* games." ✱

MAKING THE ULTIMATE BOUNTY HUNTER

You don't want to mess with a tooled-up Samus Aran…



LASER SIGHT
■ Samus' arm cannon will now glow red when the bounter hunter comes into contact with an enemy.

GRAPPLE BEAM
■ This useful energy beam allows Samus to swing across annoying chasms. It can also be used to dispatch weaker enemies.

PHASE DRIFT
■ The final Aeion ability that Samus unlocks is arguably the most powerful. When it's activated, it slows down all onscreen enemies and obstacles, giving Samus a huge advantage in battle.

CHARGE BEAM
■ Samus charges her arm cannon for a more powerful shot. It's also used to unlock some doors.

GRAVITY SUIT
■ Lava and the purple liquid are huge problems on later areas, but this useful upgrade allows Samus to run through them as easily as she does on dry land.

BEAM BURST
■ It's highly unlikely you'll miss a target when you're able to unleash a machine gun barrage of gunfire against it. It's worth noting that Aeion ability prevents you from using the Ice Beam or Power Beam when it's being used.

SCAN PULSE
■ This useful Aeion ability allows Samus to scan the area she's in for secret paths or hidden blocks. Some argue it makes the game a little too easy.

SUPER MISSILE
■ A powerful missile used to inflict gargantuan amounts of damage. It's also used to unlock green doors.

LIGHTNING ARMOR
■ This new Aeion ability covers Samus with a protective green electrical aura that protects her against damage from enemies. It won't protect her from lava or the purple liquid of SR388 though.

FREE AIM
■ Unlike earlier 2D Metroid games Samus is now able to aim in a full 360 degrees meaning no enemy is ever out of her reach.

POWER BOMBS
■ This power-up is gained after defeating Diggernaut. It allows Samus to be launched at high speeds when combined with the Spider Ball.

■ New to the Metroid series ■ Not available in Metroid II: Return Of Samus

DESERT • ISLAND • DISKS

Mark Pierce

What cherished games would you take to the island?

Four decades making videogames and Mark Pierce is still in love with the arcades. Paul Drury talks to one of the big guns of the games business

We are intrigued. Mark Pierce has spent all his adult life in the videogame business, much of that in the turbulent arcade sector of the Eighties and Nineties, and currently heads up a company called Super Happy Fun Fun. Does the name reflect the kind of boundless optimism you need to survive for that long in the industry?

"You have to love games because making them isn't always super happy fun," he admits. "It's very stressful. People think it's cool when you tell them you work in games, but it's like making doughnuts. Suddenly it's 5am and you smell of grease."

Mark first started getting his coding fingers sticky in the late seventies while studying at The School Of The Art in Chicago. Despite the very limited graphical capabilities of the college computers, Mark, a keen artist from a young age, was hooked. "Then the Bally Astrocade came out and that let you program in Bally BASIC," he remembers with fondness. "You could make little animations and I went nuts on that. I was like an idiot savant. I lived and breathed it."

Mark created a paint tool controlled by the console's innovative joystick and used it to produce demos, which attracted the attention of computer graphics pioneer and designer of the Astrocade's chipset, Tom DeFanti. He gave Mark a job at his company, Real-Time Designs, the money and experience proving useful for a student in their final year of art school. "I'd go to CES shows and be trotted out to demonstrate how easy it was to animate stuff on the Astrocade," says Mark. "What they didn't know was it took me about five weeks to prepare it so it looked easy."

The chipset used in the Astrocade was virtually the same as the one Chicago-based coin-op manufacturers Bally Midway used in its arcade games such as *Gorf* and *Wizard Of Wor*, which led to Mark working on the unlikely arcade game *Professor Pac-Man*. Developed for Bally by industry stalwarts Dave Nutting Associates (DNA) in 1983, the game had players – or 'pupils' – solving simple multichoice visual conundrums against the clock. "It was originally called *Quiz Ms* before they put the *Pac-Man* label on it," explains Mark. "I coded my own questions in Forth, copying them from Mensa books and did the little animations and a lot of the art [for the game]. DNA had some kickass graphics tools back then. I even started working on a LaserDisc game for them."

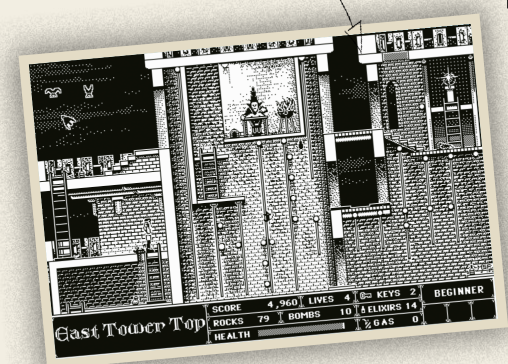
During his time at DNA, Mark got friendly with Jay Fenton (later Jamie Faye), coder of *Gorf*, and Marc Canter. Together they formed MacroMind and produced consumer versions of the tools they were using for the newly launched Apple Macintosh, releasing the very prescient MusicWorks and VideoWorks in 1984 and 1985 respectively, the latter ultimately evolving into the hugely successful Adobe Director. With such powerful tools, it wasn't long before Mark turned them to game-making. "I had one of the most creative days of my life," beams Mark. "I storyboarded my idea for *Dark Castle* to Silicon Beach Software, showing my design for almost every level on this flipchart. I ripped out the entire game in this one meeting and at the end, everyone kind of said, 'Holy shit, that's the game we're doing!'"

Collaborating with Chicago-based engineer Jonathan Gay, Mark would send his art and level designs as VideoWorks files from his home in San Diego by post to Jonathan who would turn them into playable code. This unusual method produced *Dark Castle* and its sequel *Beyond Dark Castle*, both big hits on the Mac. "We topped the charts for three years running," says Mark proudly, "but it was heavily pirated. Even today, if people ask me what games I made, *Dark Castle* is the one they've all played… but it was always a pirated copy!"

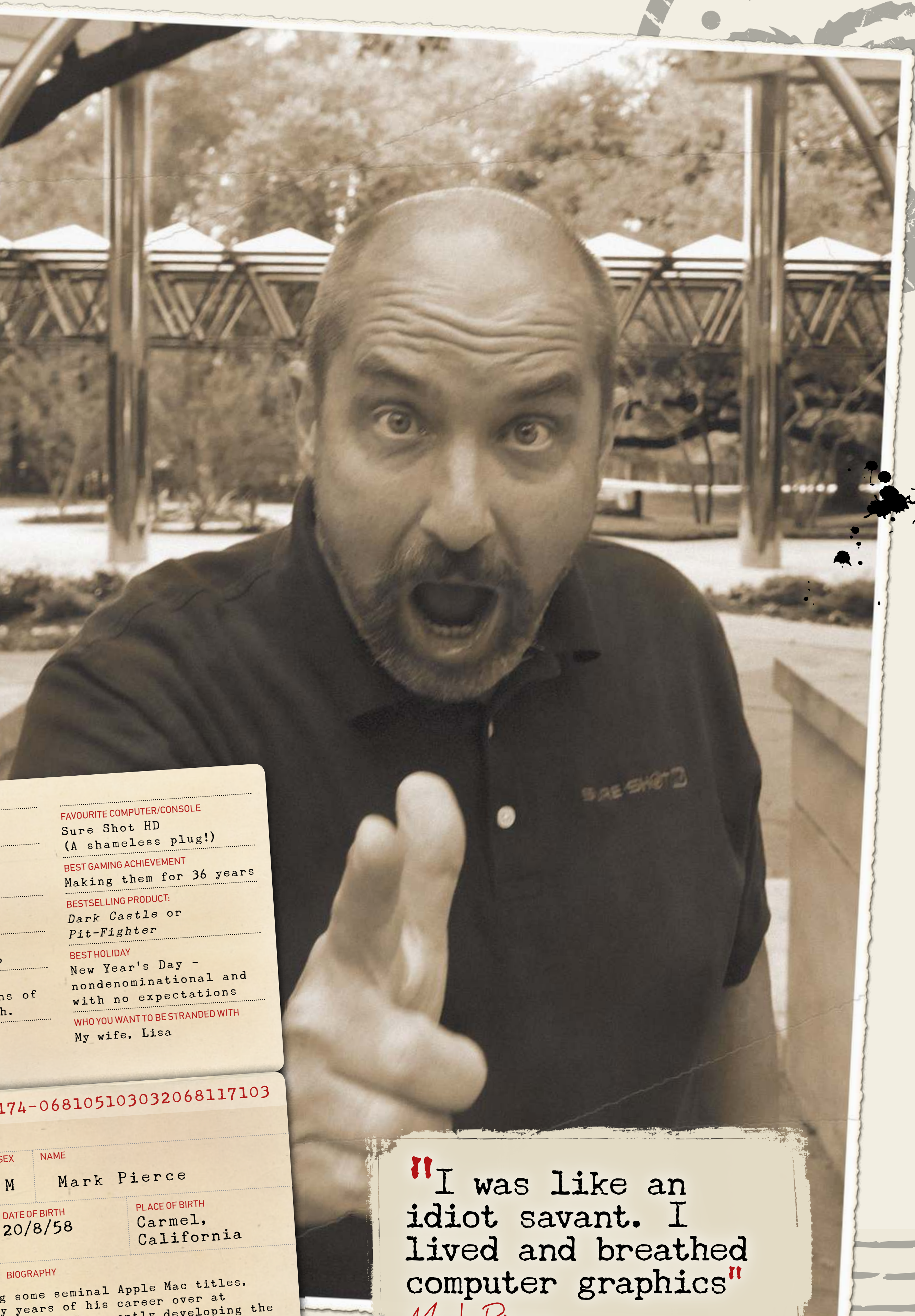
During the making of *Beyond Dark Castle*, Mark decided to move to California, for the weather as much as the work opportunities, and ended up joining Sente, the company formed by Nolan Bushnell and several Atari alumni, such as Ed Rotberg and Howard Delman (later Wendi Allen). Mark worked on the art for arcade title *Bug Bash* and then in late 1985 interviewed at Atari, taking along his Macintosh to showcase his work. "They had artists and they had game ▶

Trivia

Thanks to Tom DeFanti, Mark showcased his interactive art at the SIGGRAPH conference in 1979. The annual event celebrating computer graphics continues to this day.



Beyond Dark Castle (Mac) was a worthy sequel and a fiendish challenge.



FIRST JOB
Cutting grass

CURRENT JOB
CEO of Super Happy Fun Fun

FAVOURITE FILM
Seven Samurai

FAVOURITE ALBUM
Le Nozze Di Figaro

FAVOURITE BOOK:
I seldom read. Tons of audiobooks, though.

FIRST COMPUTER/CONSOLE
Apple Mac

FAVOURITE COMPUTER/CONSOLE
Sure Shot HD (A shameless plug!)

BEST GAMING ACHIEVEMENT
Making them for 36 years

BESTSELLING PRODUCT:
Dark Castle or *Pit-Fighter*

BEST HOLIDAY
New Year's Day – nondenominational and with no expectations

WHO YOU WANT TO BE STRANDED WITH
My wife, Lisa

174-0681051030320681171O3



SEX
M

NAME
Mark Pierce

DATE OF BIRTH
20/8/58

PLACE OF BIRTH
Carmel, California

BIOGRAPHY
After producing some seminal Apple Mac titles, Mark spent many years of his career over at Atari Games. Today he is currently developing the Sure Shot HD platform.

"I was like an idiot savant. I lived and breathed computer graphics"
Mark Pierce



Road Riot 4WD (arcade): who doesn't like big, bouncy buggies?

> "There was a lot of love and respect between us at Atari and the Midway guys. We were making great games and partying hard"
> *Mark Pierce*

► designers and engineers but they didn't really have people that did both, like me," he smiles.

Mark joined the team working on *Super Vette*, which sadly wasn't a game about a fantastic animal doctor but a driving game, the 'vette' short for 'corvette', a model of car which is usually small and often comes in red. He was paired with another new recruit, Bonnie Smithson, one of the few female engineers at the company. "Atari kind of understood that the first game anyone works on will be a failure. They used the pancake analogy – the first one off the griddle always sticks. The vision was to combine *OutRun* with *Spy Hunter* and everybody accepted we'd fail…"

The renamed *RoadBlasters* was in fact a surprise hit and suddenly Mark was "blessed with the stink of success," as he puts it. He was given the title of 'artist designer', a new role at the company, and he and Bonnie were given free rein to develop another title together. The result was the charming oddity *Escape From The Planet Of The Robot Monsters*, released in 1989. "This was the one that stuck to the griddle," sighs Mark. "It didn't lose money, but it wasn't a barn burner. It was innovative and a lot of people liked it but I spent way too much of my life on that game. I must have spent two years drawing every picture in it. It was a labour of love. I learned about working too hard on something."

Mixing puzzle elements and adventurous exploration with multidirectional blasting, the graphically rich *Robot Monsters* is full of clever touches and secrets to uncover but proved just too complicated for the average arcadegoer looking for a quick gaming fix. Which helps explain Mark's next project.

"*Klax* was definitely a knee-jerk reaction after working so hard on such a complex game," he tells us. "I wanted to do something simple. The *Tetris* phenomenon had happened and our president at the time, Hide Nakajima, said we needed another puzzle game. This was August 1989 and they wanted it ready for the ATEI show in London in January. I said okay and everyone thought I was a kissass and that I was crazy! But I was young and into substance abuse, like so many of us were in the Eighties."

Joined by the straight-laced Dave Akers, Mark took inspiration from a famous scene from perennial US TV favourite *I Love Lucy*, which had our heroine frantically sorting chocolates from an increasingly speedy conveyor belt. He spent weeks just drawing static screens of what looked like puzzle games, with arrangements of squares and triangles, until the basic layout of *Klax* was arrived upon. Dave mocked up a demo on the Amiga and soon fellow coders in the Atari labs were queuing up to play it, which was always a good sign. "Those four months making *Klax* were a magical time," twinkles Mark. "We went from nothing to me standing on the floor of Earls Court in January 1990 presenting the finished game with Depeche Mode's *Just Can't Get Enough* playing in the background."

The game did well in the arcades but even better in the home market, the simplicity of the design making it easy to port to even aging micros like the ZX Spectrum, and Mark himself handled the Mega Drive conversion. He also worked on arcade beat-'em-up *Pit-Fighter*, which pioneered the use of digitised graphics and entailed recruiting real-life muscleman to pose for the in-game fighters. "When Gary Stark, the lead engineer, and I were looking for a model for the 'ultimate warrior' in that game, we had to hang about in gyms, scoping out guys, then ask them if we could take pictures of them for a game," he says, stifling his giggles. "I was not comfortable."

Based on the movie *Bloodsport*, *Pit-Fighter* was a commercial success but rather than opt for a sequel, Mark decided to apply the new tech to the scrolling beat-'em-up. "I wanted *Guardians Of The Hood* to be like *Double Dragon* with digitised graphics but it turned out to be a total turd for a number of reasons," he admits. "That project had the most incompetent engineer I've ever worked with in my life and that can totally scuttle a game. It was a nightmare project."

Whilst the bug-ridden, clunky *Guardians Of The Hood* failed to make an impression in the arcades, *Mortal Kombat* stepped

Praise for Mark

Here's what **Retro Gamer** has to say about Mark Pierce's work…



Darran Jones
Being a big fan of arcade games I've played a lot of Mark's games. I loved *Klax* and *Escape From The Planet Of The Robot Monsters*, but it's perhaps *RoadBlasters* that had the biggest impact on me. I was utterly addicted to it as a youngster and was absolutely made up when a stunning port arrived on the Atari Lynx.



Paul Drury
It was a pleasure talking to someone who had a hand in the arcade games that I pumped coins into as a kid, especially as Mark remains as enthusiastic about playing and creating games as ever. I've thoroughly enjoyed shooting big game on his impressive Sure Shot HD setup, too, though as a vegetarian I do feel a bit guilty.

Timeline

1982

PROFESSOR PAC-MAN
■ **YEAR:** 1982
■ **FORMAT:** Arcade
Mark's debut release was this unlikely use of the *Pac-Man* licence, featuring various 'spot the odd one out' questions and other visual puzzles.



1986

DARK CASTLE
■ **YEAR:** 1986
■ **FORMAT:** Apple Mac
A groundbreaking platformer, full of ingenious levels and cartoon sensibilities, this was an essential title if you had a Mac back in the Eighties.



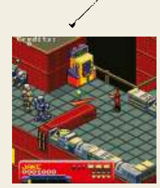
1987

ROADBLASTERS
■ **YEAR:** 1987
■ **FORMAT:** Arcade
Combining driving with shooting, Mark's first arcade game was a surprise hit. See RG75 for a full Making Of article.



1989

ESCAPE FROM THE PLANET OF THE ROBOT MONSTERS
■ **YEAR:** 1989
■ **FORMAT:** Arcade
Though not a big success in the arcade on release, this was a real labour of love for Mark and is definitely worth revisiting.

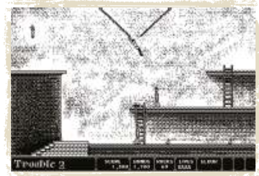




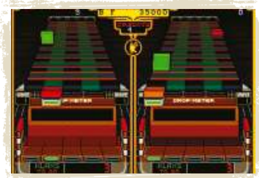
Area 51 (arcade) helped get Atari back on track in the mid-Nineties.

Pierce on Pierce

Mark picks his three favourite projects



DARK CASTLE
The ease of piracy made it a viral game enjoyed by millions on a platform that had few games at the time. Striking a note in pop culture feels good.



KLAX
I took it on as a bit of a dare. Everything on the game was done quickly and intuitively and it ended up working. That is magic.



SURE SHOT HD
With a team of about ten, we have been crazy enough to set out to establish a new platform. It's all my disciplines and experience coming together.

Castle Capers

Unless you had access to an original Apple Macintosh in the Eighties – and most of us Brits didn't – it's quite possible you missed out on *Dark Castle* and its sequel. We urge you to rectify that. The game is full of fiendishly designed rooms and lovely graphical touches and we reckon *Prince of Persia*, released three years later, owes it a debt of gratitude. Not only is it a great game, the tools Mark and his collaborator on both titles, Jonathan Gay, created to produce it ended up being as influential as the game itself. "I used VideoWorks which ultimately became Adobe Director along with a programme called Super Paint which Jonathan [wrote] and he went on to develop Flash," explains Mark. "Director and Flash were pretty much the ecosystem for multimedia up until quite recently and both of them came out of *Dark Castle*."

into the arena and eclipsed *Pit-Fighter* for the rest of the decade and beyond. Indeed during the early Nineties, Atari as a whole found itself rather overshadowed by its rivals. "We hit a rough spot," says Mark. "EA hired a whole bunch of people from us and they really eviscerated Atari. Like, they stole John Salwitz and Dave Ralston, who had done *Paperboy* and *Rampart*, and that took some of the soul from Atari. They even took Ed Logg, who had done classics like *Asteroids* and *Gauntlet*, and he was actually crying when he left."

The exodus of quality staff was compounded by under investment in cutting edge technology and a management team that lacked vision. Having finished *Road Riot 4WD* in 1991, Mark was all ready to leave Atari and set up an independent development studio but was persuaded to stay with the offer of stepping up to become Head of Product Development. So began a long and sometimes painful restructuring as Mark tried to reinvigorate the company but by the mid-Nineties, his determination to create cohesive, autonomous, properly resourced teams began to bear fruits. As someone who had 'come up from the trenches' of game development to a position in management, he had an understanding of the technology required to produce quality titles and felt very positive when Atari Games became part of WMS Industries, which also owned Midway Games.

"There was a lot of love and respect between us at Atari and the Midway guys like Eugene Jarvis, Mark Turmell and Ed Boon," Mark says. "We'd all known each other from shows. I mean, we were the arcade business back then. Now we were the same family! Plus Midway had this 3DFX hardware which was state of the art. It was an incredible time… we were making great games, hitting our targets and partying hard."

The run of great games had begun in 1995 with *Area 51*, a cracking gun game which cleverly tapped into the alien conspiracy theories of the day, and continued after the buyout with the racer *San Francisco Rush*. Both games were hits ▶



Pit-Fighter's digitised graphics paved the way for the likes of Mortal Kombat.

1989



KLAX
■ **YEAR:** 1989
■ **FORMAT:** Arcade
Creating a compelling puzzle game can be like bottling lightening but Mark's flash of inspiration created a memorable challenge.

1998



GAUNTLET LEGENDS
■ **YEAR:** 1998
■ **FORMAT:** Arcade
Updating a classic can be a tricky task, but this fine coin-op kept the spirit of the original whilst adding graphical polish and new gameplay mechanics.

2008



DON'T WAKE THE WIFE
■ **YEAR:** 2008
■ **FORMAT:** Mobile
Mark's been involved with over 60 mobile titles but this one, requiring you to sneak home after a skinful, caught our eye for some reason.

2016



BIG BUCK HUNTER PRO
■ **YEAR:** 2016
■ **FORMAT:** Sure Shot HD
Mark's current project involves recreating the arcade gun game experience at home and he has big plans for its future.

DESERT ISLAND DISKS

Readers' Questions

Shinobi: What made you decide to have a female final boss in *Guardians Of The Hood*?
This game was one of the bigger disappointments of my life. I will take the blame for deciding to try to make a digitised *Double Dragon*-style game when after *Pit-Fighter* we should have stuck with a one on one fighter… which is what Ed Boon did with a little game called *Mortal Kombat*. *Guardians* was plagued with some really bad programing and a bloated team. I hadn't even remembered we had a female boss. I expect it was because we thought it would be cool. I wish I had a better answer but projects that go like this, you just want to move on and forget the whole mess.

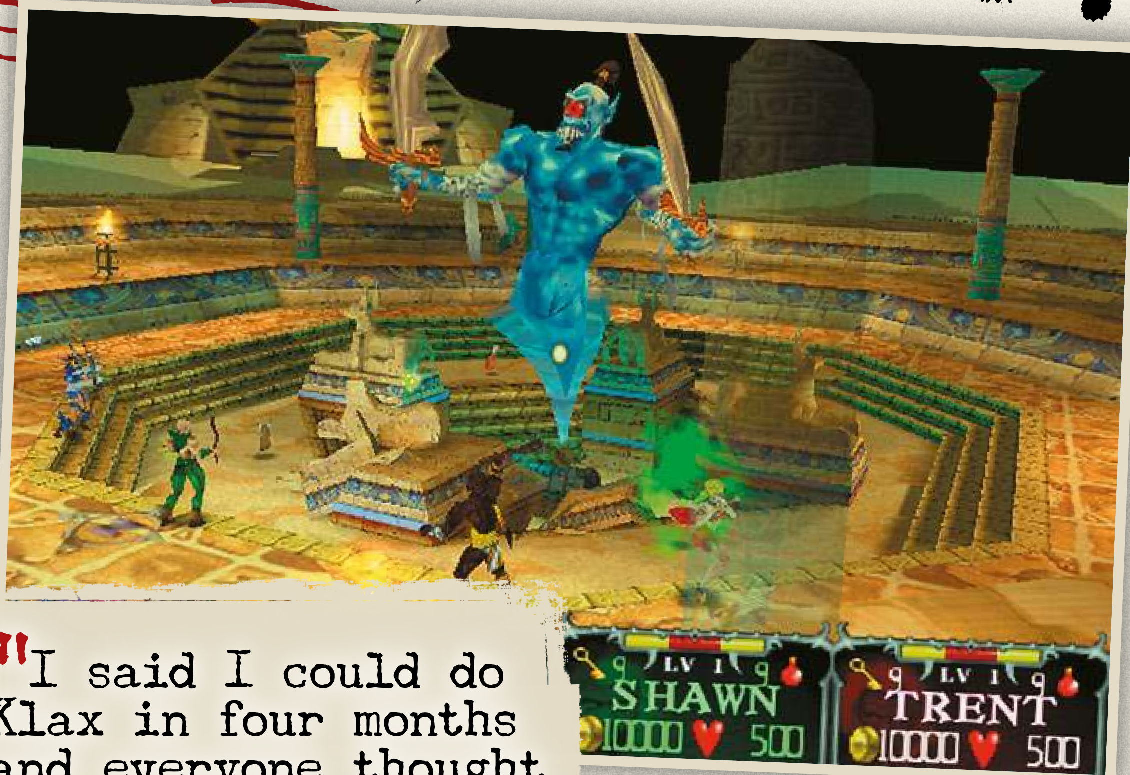
Eric: Were you involved in porting *Dark Castle* to other systems?
No, and most of them were botched ports. Jeff Spangeneberg, who later started Iguana, began the Amiga port which I think someone had to take over. There was a Sega version which was particularly horrible.

Northway: Was *Klax* prototyped on the Amiga?
Yes, Dave Akers was the sole software engineer and I explained my basic idea of sorting colours from five columns to him, on a Friday. On the Monday, he took me into the Atari Video Lab (which had the only Amiga at Atari) and put on a playable version which showed enough promise for us to jump in with both feet.

Mayhem: Were you aware of the legal action by Lott and Adlum when programming *Professor Pac-Man*?
I don't know what you're talking about. *Professor Pac-Man* was funded by Dave Nutting Associates, which had previously had some success with a mechanical trivia game, and were trying to repeat it in video. Rick Frankel and Sue Forner, who were an item at the time and lived in the same building as Real-Time Design where I worked, started out by animating Mensa questions and asked me to help. It was Midway that suggested or enforced that it would do better with the *Pac-Man* licence.

NickThorpe: Where did the tagline 'it is the Nineties and there is time for *Klax*' come from?
I came up with that phrase and the hand signal on the side of the cabinet while I was stuck in traffic on the Santa Monica freeway. We didn't know what to put on the side of the cab so you just came up with stuff!

Mark took up the task of updating Gauntlet for the arcades of 1998.



"I said I could do Klax in four months and everyone thought I was crazy"
Mark Pierce

▶ in the arcade and at home via their many console ports and they each spawned several sequels. With confidence riding high at the company, Mark made an erudite case for revisiting one of Atari's most beloved treasures. "My recollection was that I said, 'Why the fuck aren't we doing *Gauntlet* again?' Some people were like, 'You can't touch *Gauntlet*,' like it was this sacred thing. I was like, 'Duh!' We have this great 3D hardware now so not doing it would just be stupid."

Mark's eloquence won the day and *Gauntlet: Legends*, released into arcades in 1998, proved a huge money spinner, channelling the co-operative/competitive spirit of the original. However, Mark was becoming increasingly disillusioned with his senior management and left in April 2000 to set up his own development company, christened by Mark's first employee, Mike Bailey. "He said he'd always wanted to work at a company called Super Happy Fun Fun," remembers Mark. "He answered the question far too quickly, like he'd been waiting all his life to be asked it. It was the stupidest fucking name I'd ever heard but I got to like it and it stuck."

Mark's new venture initially got a contract to develop a title for the PS2 and GameCube but was hit with the triple whammy of publisher Vivendi pulling out of the deal, the Dotcom bubble bursting and the crisis of confidence in the business community which followed the 9/11 attacks. They survived for a while handling ports, including *Alias* and *Turok* from console to PC, and then started picking up small contracts for mobile titles. "It was hell," says Mark. "You had to buy like 500 phones to make sure your game [worked on them]. I am proud of *Slingo*, though. It was a cross-platform, networked game in 2005 which let you play against people on their PC with your mobile phone. And you could chat! There were a lot of firsts with that…"

Mark also highlights their work on *Tilt-A-World*, which used a phone's camera to detect movement and allowed you to roll a ball around on the screen by tilting the handset. This was before Nintendo's Wii made motion-sensing technology commonplace and led to a relationship with Jakks Pacific, the market leaders at the time for plug-and-play units, which was trying to incorporate motion controls into its products. "We helped produce *Ultimotion Sports*, which was a poor man's Wii," explains Mark. "It was brilliantly marketed and pretty good for $39. They advertised it on the shopping channel and in one day, they sold 50,000 units. I swear a lot of old ladies thought they were buying a Wii for their grandchildren."

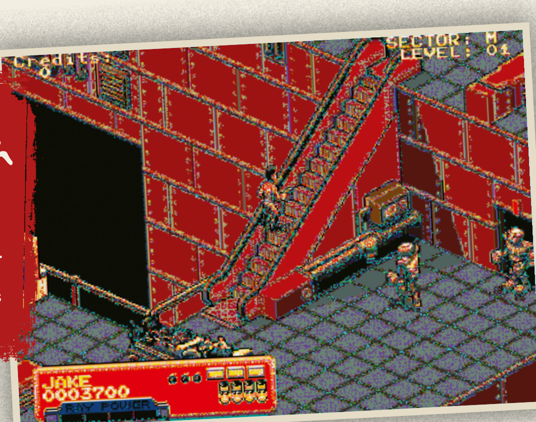
So began a fruitful relationship with Jakks, with Mark's company producing a string of plug-and-play games over many years, including, at Mark's suggestion, a home version of the hugely popular coin-op *Big Buck Hunter* which sold an incredible 1.4 million units, mainly in the US. During this period, Mark was pushing to invest in better hardware and when Jakks pulled out of the market, his plans for second generation plug-and-play gun games came to fruition with Sure Shot HD.

"I want people to be able to download and play big-name coin-op gun games at home with real arcade controls on their HD televisions for under a hundred bucks," he states proudly. "We want to bring the arcade home!" *

Thanks to www.arcade-museum.com, *Shinobi* and Martyn Carroll for help with this article.

Trivia

Mark's Escape from the *Planet Of The Robot Monsters* was a big hit with fellow game designer Mark Turmell and you can see some influences in his arcade game *Smash TV*.



Mark Pierce's

Desert Island Disks

The games that Mark simply couldn't live without

01 Defender (ARCADE)

This *has* to be the arcade game. The insane controls that Eugene Jarvis came up with and how you must become one with the machine to play, the speed, the white knuckle level you get to when you're fighting to stay alive has never been matched for me. I have spent spans of many months playing every day, over the decades, and it never gets old.

02 Tempest (ARCADE)

Dave Theurer is a true unsung giant in videogame history and this is a beautiful game. The unique, whirligig controller, abstract format and level to level challenge is pure genius. While in my early days of working at Real-Time Design, I would spend all my lunch time and money playing at a restaurant around the corner.

03 Candy Crush Saga (IOS)

What can I say? I am addicted and have played every day for the past two or three years. King keeps adding to it with all sorts of evil methods to get your money… and it gets better every day.

04 Tokimeki Memorial Taisen Puzzle-dama (ARCADE)

A puzzle fighter from the Nineties from Japan that was awesome. Simple 'match three' gameplay and typical sugar sweet Japanese presentation with the added bonus of having High School girls behind each of the opposing playfields. As you were beating the other player, the characters' clothes would start to get in disarray and eventually they would morph into robots…

05 Eight Ball (PINBALL)

It's the one with the Fonzie lookalike on the back glass. When I was in Art school in Chicago there was a corner bar, open 24 hours, between my apartment and the train I took to school downtown. I was a broke ass art student and on more than one occasion on my way to school I would end up using my train fair to play and had to turn around, go back to my apartment and wait for my roommates to loan me money to get to school the next day.

06 Attack From Mars (PINBALL)

For the short span that Steve Ritchie, a pinball legend, joined us at Atari, he brought one of these into his office and we would play every day. The game has one of the best playfields ever. I got to learn all sorts of play techniques from the master himself.

07 Gunfight (BALLY ASTROCADE)

While at School Of The Art Institute, where I first made computer graphics, they had Bally Astrocades in the Video Lab and I was in there all the time. We would play each other for money… I was pretty good!

08 Street Fighter Championship Edition (ARCADE)

Nothing needed for me to write here… but note, on my desert island, almost all of my games are best when competing against worthy opponents. Arcade games were without a doubt the prototype of truly 'social' videogames.

01



02



03



04



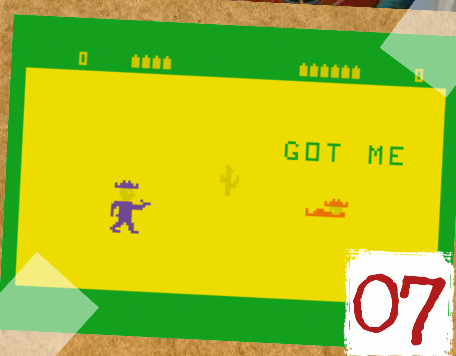
05



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08





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02



The Chaos Engine

HOW THE BITMAPS MADE ME EAT HUMBLE PIE

» AMIGA » 1993 » THE BITMAP BROTHERS

When I was a SNES and Mega Drive owner I was always in awe of The Bitmap Brothers. The studio's games always looked incredibly stylish and they often sounded incredible – *Xenon 2*, I'm mainly talking about you – in short, it was one of the few developers that made me jealous that I didn't own an Amiga or Atari ST.

A few weeks after reading the glowing reviews of *The Chaos Engine,* I was playing it around a friend's house and the first thing that struck me was how slow it felt compared to the shooters I would typically play on my Mega Drive or SNES. Snobbishly, I decided that I was actually better off without it, so I became less interested when I eventually discovered it was heading to consoles as well.

In fact, it wasn't until late 1994 that I finally picked up a cheap copy for the Amiga 1200 I had purchased (I had foolishly swapped it for a SNES with 50-odd games) that I was finally forced to eat my words. *The Chaos Engine* certainly isn't a 9/10 shooter by any stretch of the imagination, but it is a very good one. It's more about controlling crowds than having fast reflexes and it's all about being aware of your surroundings and working out where best to situate yourself. It's a thinking man's shooter, which explains why I was so unimpressed with it on those first few plays.

It really comes alive with a second player, and the six available characters are different enough that choosing the right two really determines how you tackle the game. It turns out that I was always picking the Navvie when I had first played it on my mate's Amiga, and his slow pace simply wasn't suited to my style of play. The Preacher (or Scientist, as he was known in the US) quickly became my character of choice as he had high mobility and shots that passed through enemies. The game changed immeasurably for me at that moment and while I still feel it's not quite as incredible as many of the Amiga mags made out at the time, it proved to me that you should never judge a game harshly on just a few short plays. *



>> This month we travel the globe with Mario, find out if Cuphead lives up to all its hype and revisit the latest Rogue Trooper remaster



Super Mario Odyssey

THE REASON YOU PLAY VIDEOGAMES

INFORMATION

- » **FEATURED SYSTEM:** SWITCH
- » **RELEASED:** OUT NOW
- » **PRICE:** £39.99
- » **PUBLISHER:** NINTENDO
- » **DEVELOPER:** NINTENDO EPD
- » **PLAYERS:** 1-2



It's impossible not to love *Super Mario Odyssey*. It takes everything that's great about videogames and amplifies them tenfold, delivering a blistering amount of fun that will have you giggling like a child and wondering how Nintendo keeps on coming up with fresh new ideas for its most iconic mascot.

Odyssey's premise is as slight as they come, and once again revolves around Mario rescuing Princess Peach from Bowser – only this time Bowser is intent on wedding the beleaguered Princess. Our plucky hero is having none of this, of course, and teams up with Cappy – whose own girlfriend has been kidnapped by the monstrous villain – to plan a ridiculous globe-trotting rescue attempt that sees the dynamic duo travelling across some of the most fantastical worlds of the *Super Mario* universe. It's a pathetically slight story, for sure, but it's backed up by some of the most compelling gameplay we've yet witnessed in a *Mario* game.

Previous *Mario* adventures have had numerous gimmicks to sell them to fresh audiences and *Odyssey* is no exception. Mario's ghostly new friend Cappy has the ability to possess a variety of different enemies, all of which give Mario access to an insane amount of different skills. Dinosaurs, long-beaked birds, Goombas, Hammer Bros and countless other foes can all be manipulated in some way, allowing Mario to fully interact with and explore the beautiful worlds that he finds himself in. Some of these enemies you might only use one or twice in your ten-hour-plus odyssey, while others will be used more often, but every single one makes you really think about how you tackle each new challenge that Nintendo's game throws at you.

Power Moons replace the stars and Shines of earlier games and are needed to power the flying ship, which transports Mario to each new world. Some of these moons can be purchased in the new shops that Mario can visit on each world, but most are earned by

» [Switch] There are so many fantastic worlds to discover in *Odyssey*. Just make sure you have enough Power Moons.

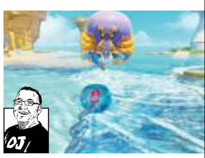




BRIEF HISTORY

» Mario made his first ever appearance in a videogame as Jumpman in the 1981 hit, *Donkey Kong*. He then made appearances in the likes of *Mario Bros.* before appearing in *Super Mario Bros.* for the NES. Since then he's become Nintendo's most famous creation, starring in countless critically received platformers and appearing in all sorts of spin-off games.

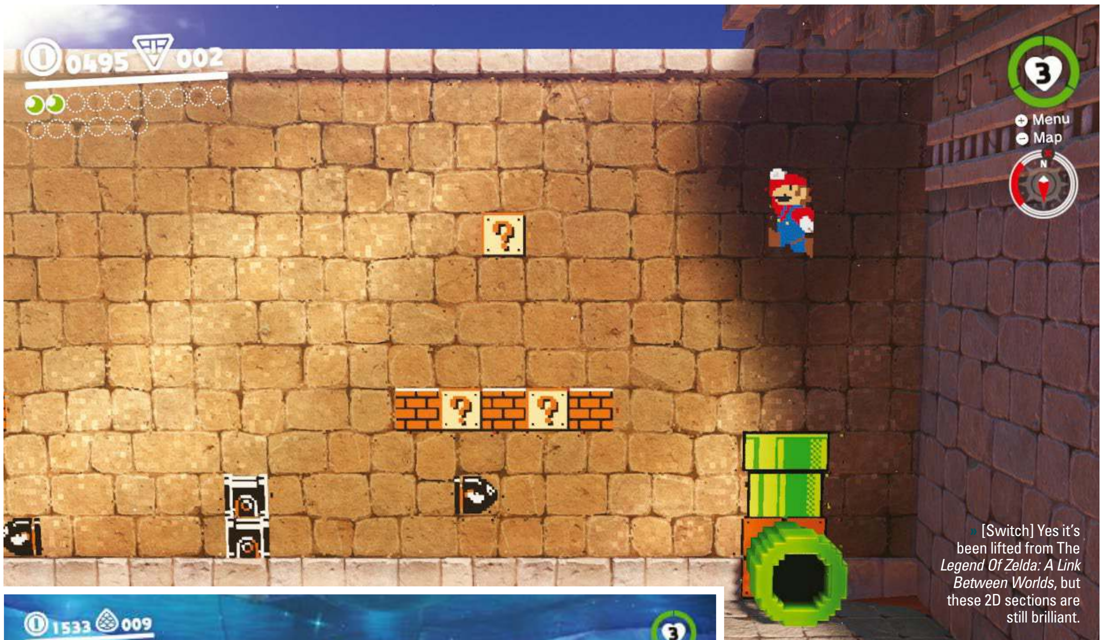
✱ PICKS OF THE MONTH



DARRAN
Super Mario Odyssey
Games rarely make me giggle like a small child, but *Odyssey* did just that. It's simply a wonderfully crafted videogame.



NICK
Puyo Puyo Tetris
I took my Switch to the company conference and played this with Sam. The suffering I inflicted will sustain me through winter.



[Switch] Yes it's been lifted from The *Legend Of Zelda: A Link Between Worlds*, but these 2D sections are still brilliant.



» [Switch] There are a staggering number of enemies to leap into. Look how cute this fish is.

completing challenges. The challenges themselves have their DNA in the ones found in *Super Mario 64*, but are no less entertaining. Indeed, it's the sheer amount of variety in *Odyssey*'s Power Moons that make them so compelling to collect. One moment you're possessing a fish so you can retrieve several pieces of a broken moon, the next you're using a Chain Chomp to make your way past some impenetrable blocks, or taking control of a slab of meat in order to entice a giant bird. Then you'll be using a Samurai costume to gain access to an otherwise out-of-bounds room, outrun a Tyrannosaurus Rex or complete a puzzle by possessing one of the pieces and manipulating it around the board. There's always something new to do in *Odyssey*, always something else to see and always something else to possess and the end result is a game that's always pushing your expectations and almost always exceeding them.

The worlds of *Odyssey* might pale in size to some of the locations found in other popular triple-A games, but for a *Mario* title they're truly gargantuan and absolutely packed with things to do. The structure of the main game is clever enough that the levels feel on par with the likes of *Super Mario 64* or *Sunshine*, but once you start exploring you realise just how impressive the size of these stages actually are. It's most telling when you return to the Odyssey ship that helps you on your quest to revisit past worlds and realise just how many Power Moons you've actually missed. So good is *Odyssey*'s design, so brilliant is its structure that you'll want to return to those earlier worlds to mop up those missing Moons. In fact, you don't really have much of a choice, because as with every Mario game before it, reaching the end of its story isn't the end of the game



» [Switch] *Odyssey*'s presentation is absolutely faultless. Every aspect of it oozes fun.

and Nintendo has plenty of fantastic tricks up its sleeve once those credits roll, including a… well, that would be telling. Part of *Odyssey*'s brilliance is discovering its magic for yourself and it's something we're loathe to spoil for you.

There's no such thing as a perfect videogame, but it's hard to believe how Nintendo could improve upon its latest epic platformer. The controls are exceptional, the variety of the game is astonishing while the sheer amount of fun it offers will take you back to when you first discovered the medium. The sheer confidence on display in *Super Mario Odyssey* is exceptional, more so when you consider the franchise's rich legacy. We're confident that you're not going to play a better platformer than *Odyssey* until Nintendo decides to make a new one. It's peerless, it's faultless, it's the reason we love videogames. ✱

In a nutshell

After reinventing the open world adventure with *Breath Of The Wild*, Nintendo has now transformed the platformer for a new generation of gamers. The best 3D *Mario* game we've ever played.

>> Score **100%**



» [Switch] The real-life-inspired New Donk City is one of the best worlds in the game.

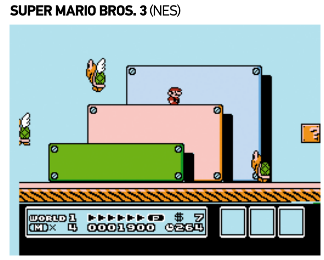


✱ SHOP TILL YOU DROP

Mario still collects coins but now they serve a new purpose. Rather than grant Mario an extra life once 100 have been collected, they are instead used to buy items from the shop found on each new world. Typically these items take the form of costumes and many of them are world-specific, so you can buy a Samurai costume in one world and a chef's suit in another. Interestingly, many of the best suits need world specific coins to buy them with, which simply gives you an excuse to fully explore each level. The costumes themselves don't change Mario's abilities in any way, they're just there for a bit of fun and until you see Mario running around in just his underpants you wonder why it's taken Nintendo so long to add them.

✱ WHY NOT TRY

▼ SOMETHING OLD
SUPER MARIO BROS. 3 (NES)



▼ SOMETHING NEW
YOOKA-LAYLEE (PS4)



✱ PICK OF THE MONTH

Fire Emblem Warriors

» **System:** Switch (tested), New 3DS » **Buy it from:** Online, retail
» **Buy it for:** £49.99, £59.99 (limited edition) £39.99 (New 3DS)

***Hyrule Warriors* was a surprise hit from Omega Force and Team Ninja, successfully marrying the mechanics and fan service of the *Zelda* series to the over-the-top action of the *Musou* franchise.** As good as that pairing was, the developers have really outdone themselves with their latest offering, as it adds a deep layer of strategy that simply wasn't available in *Hyrule Warriors*.

All the key elements of the *Fire Emblem* strategy series are found in *Warriors* and they work exceptionally well. The weapon triangle is in place, meaning battles against certain weapon-wielding opponents are easier or harder, it's possible to team up with a companion, enhancing your attack power and increasing your relationship with them once the battle has ended and permadeath is also included, adding a further level of complexity to proceedings (it can be turned off if you want an easier challenge, though). Weapons can be sold or enhanced at your camp, Pegasus Knights still struggle against archers, while it's possible to create a large number of new moves by collecting items dropped in battle.

The story that brings the likes of Chrom, Marth, Lyn, Frederick and Corrin together is delightfully absurd and focuses on two twins, Rowan and Lianna, who are trying to stop the world of Aytolis from plunging into darkness. It's silly and rarely makes sense, but it does deliver some fun fan service, particularly if you've been waiting to see how your favourite heroes would fare if they ever got into fights with one another. It's a shame that not every core game and its characters are represented, but the 20-plus heroes won't disappoint.

Content-wise *Fire Emblem Warriors* is ridiculous. The core game will take many hours to complete, but you'll spend most of your time lost in the gigantic History mode, which recreates many of the classic battles from *Shadow Dragon*, *Shadows Of Valentia*, *The Blazing Blade*, *Awakening* and *Fates*. Battles vary as well, from rescue missions to time attacks and sieges. *Fire Emblem Warriors* is full of variety and filled with the same fan service that made *Hyrule Warriors* so much fun to play.

» **Score 85%**



» [Switch] The carnage you can unleash in *Fire Emblem Warriors* is absolutely spectacular.



» [Switch] You'll spend most of your time in History mode which allows you to take part in classic battles.



Cuphead

» **System:** Xbox One, PC » **Buy it for:** £14.99
» **Buy it from:** Online

If we graded games solely on how they looked then *Cuphead* would be awarded our second 100% of the month. However, we expect a little more from our games, and all is not well beneath *Cuphead*'s exterior. While it's a more-than-competent run-and-gun, *Cuphead* makes numerous mistakes ranging from scenery that hides bullets, to sloppy hitbox detection and a reliance on memorisation that makes *Rick Dangerous* look like a walk through the park. There's no denying its core boss fights are solid and fun to play and there's some nice ideas like using a parry attack to revive your buddy, but many of the run-and-gun and flying sections are frustrating, mainly due to the lack of popcorn enemies and poor, uninspiring level design.

» **Score 68%**



Rogue Trooper Redux

» **System:** PS4 (Tested), Xbox One, Switch, PC
» **Buy it for:** £19.99 » **Buy it from:** Online

Here's a remake of 2006's *Rogue Trooper*, a third-person shoot-'em-up which follows the exploits of 'genetic infantry' soldier Rogue as he battles the Norts and the Traitor General responsible for betraying the GIs. It's a fun plot which is acted well in cutscenes and the feeling of war is conveyed well by missions, while the visual overhaul helps to bring Nu-Earth to life. While stages are linear, you freedom in how you approach them – you can set traps with mines, snipe from afar or charge in with guns blazing. The original wasn't a top-tier game, but the revamp has helped the limited source material keep pace with more modern entries in the genre, and you should find that it provides a couple of nights of fun blasting.

» **Score 76%**



Stardew Valley

retro GAMER SIZZLER

» **System:** Switch » **Buy it for:** £14.99
» **Buy it from:** Online

ConcernedApe's *Harvest Moon*-alike has found its definitive version. The major problem we had with the original *Stardew Valley* was that we yearned to take it out on the road with us, and now we have no excuse to not do that, thanks to this portable port. For those uninitiated into the Cult Of Stardew, this is perhaps the most relaxing experience you'll find on a videogame this decade. There's no definitive goal: you have a farm you can tend to, but you can spend your time fishing, hunting monsters, mining, making friends or trying to wife/husband one of nearby town's bachelors or bachelorettes. The only real issue we took with this particular port was that the load time between each day was longer than other versions.

» **Score 92%**

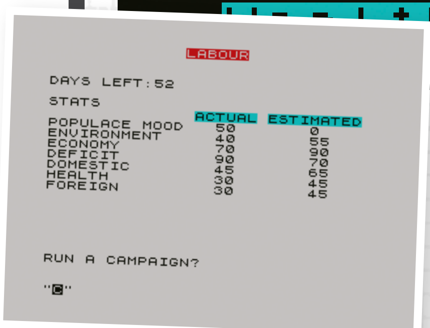
Gamers HOMEBREW

Brewing since 2005

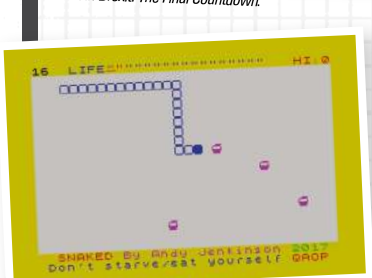
Gaming NEWS



» [ZX Spectrum] The Killer Ducks From Outer Space are here – don't quack up under pressure.



» [ZX Spectrum] Off to a flying start on the campaign trail in *Brexit: The Final Countdown*.



» [ZX Spectrum] *Snaked* is a enjoyable, but quite tough, clone of *Snake*.

BASIC CHALLENGES

The ZX Spectrum BASIC Jam is precisely what the name suggests, a competition for programmers to produce BASIC games for the ZX Spectrum computer. There were 27 games created and, whilst we weren't surprised to see a few variants of good old *Snake* on the list – it's a mainstay of BASIC programming, and indeed of competitions like this – there were text-based simulations, arcade games and even an entry called *Physiced* which is billed as a "physics-based arcade game".

In fact, action-oriented games in BASIC can struggle due to speed issues, so while the bizarrely named *Atomic Laser Space Octopus* manages to provide some shooting action that doesn't feel too sluggish, other twitch-style games, like *Killer Ducks From Outer Space* or the flickery *Lunar Lander*, are more clunky and less enjoyable to play. Somewhere near the middle of the arcade pack is *ZX Dungeon*, a simplified *Pac-Man*-style maze-based affair.

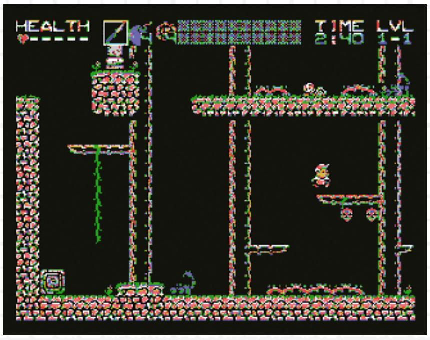
Puzzle-style games fared better. *Ink Fall* is based on trying to flood the playfield with colour, slowly absorbing individual attribute cells which match the current 'fill' until everything is the same colour. Another entry is *Sokoban*, which does suffer from speed issues, but offers 50 brain-bending levels to work through for players willing to wait for the stage to draw. There were some interesting-looking space-bound simulations including *B-Elite* – a cut-down variant on the classic space trading game, *Elite* – and *Break/Space*, where the player is thrown into a random sector of space and must gather their previously ejected warp cores.

Back on Earth, *Land/Lord* is a simulation based on the game *Hamurabi* where a king must decide how to manage resources, including people, land and grain, to keep the kingdom ticking over. In a similar but more satirical vein is *Brexit: The Final Countdown* which is both a simulation and a practical demonstration of how text-based *Football Manager*-style games work. You can find the entries over at Kikstart.eu/zx-basic-jam-2017 with some also being playable online.

The Retro Challenge is another competition but it's broader in its scope, entrants have to be doing something retro-oriented while blogging about it. Previous instalments have seen people repairing or servicing machines, developing or porting games and even making pixel-perfect recreations of Andy Warhol's Amiga pictures. The website is at retrochallenge.org and links are provided there to the previous iterations.

NEW GAMES NEEDED

If you have a homebrew project you would like to see featured then please contact us at: **darran.jones@futurenet.com**



» [MSX] There's lots of things to drain an explorer's health when spelunking.

DELVING DEEPER

When explorer Michael Xavier goes missing in the Yucatan jungle while trying to solve a mystery, it falls to his friend Elaine to launch her own expedition to find him, facing all manner of creatures and hazards along the way as she climbs and jumps her way through the deadly and ominous undergrowth.

XSpelunker for the MSX has been designed to challenge players, so don't expect an easy journey, and the levels are also procedurally generated so each playthrough will be different. The start of this adventure can be discovered in the clearing at Kikstart.eu/xspelunker-msx.

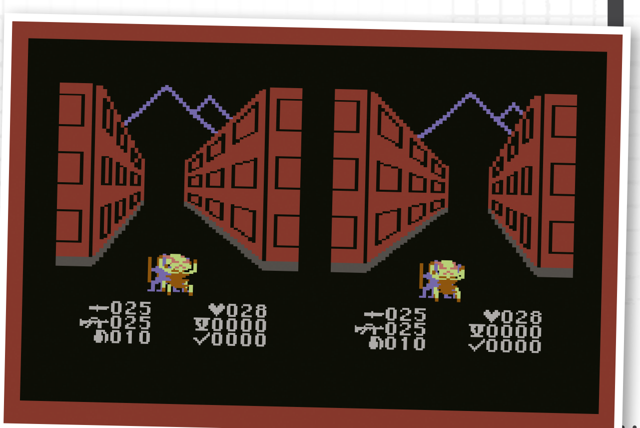
"Spelunker for the MSX has been designed to challenge players"

VIRTUALLY THERE

Virtual reality is currently a hot topic in gaming circles, but this isn't the first time that VR has made headlines. Previous attempts have involved 8-bit and 16-bit hardware, so what's to stop an enterprising 8-bit owner from coming up with his own solution?

That's what Jim 64 did, converting a set of VR goggles with a cheap LCD display into something a C64 could talk to, then writing a game called *Street Defender* to use his new device. More information about constructing your own headset can be found at Kikstart.eu/vr64-c64.

» [C64] *Street Defender* doesn't really work without the VR64 headset.





» [MSX2] *Myths And Dragons* is a work in progress for the V9990-equipped MSX2.

HOMEBREW HEROES

Kai Magazine – Kikstart.eu/kai-magazine - has an impressive catalogue of MSX2 games. We spoke to developer Oscar Kenneth Albero Ingles about writing for multiple sound systems and stereoscopic 3D



THE BIG INTERVIEW

First of all, how many people are involved with Kai Magazine?

Two people, Xavi Sorinas and me, but sometimes we have help from other people for the music, such as John Hassink or to add extra features, such as Arturo Ragozinni.

What was it that originally drew your team to the MSX2 as a platform?

The MSX was the first computer we ever had, and when the MSX2 came out we were amazed by the quality of the Japanese games and we fell in love for ever with it.

And what is it like to program for compared to the original MSX?

The MSX2 has a lot more graphical resources and capabilities, so the games require a lot more graphical work in order to produce a good MSX2 game with the expected quality.



» [MSX2] Kai Magazine makes impressive-looking games for the MSX2.

You support expansions, such as OPL4 sound, does this make development harder?

Indeed! We support three sound chips for the music – OPLL, OPL1 and OPL4 – and two chips for the sound effects, PSG and OPL4, but sometimes even Konami's SCC. This means a lot more of work in order to compose the music for all those sound chips and to add support within the code while optimising the very little memory and CPU resources the MSX2 has. Sometimes it is a nightmare.

And where did the idea for the 3D graphics in *Dim X* come from?

I've always been a fan of stereoscopic 3D. One day I came across a PC program which mixed two images in order to make anaglyphic 3D. I converted it to MSX and it looked pretty good. I studied how to produce the anaglyphic effect with a design program, optimised the colour palette to make it look good with just 16 colours, and eventually I managed to get some very good results, so I decided to make a 3D game.

Can you tell us about any of your upcoming projects?

With pleasure. We are currently working on a MSX2 game called *Myths And Dragons* which supports the V9990 expansion cartridge (AKA GFX9000, Powergraph, Krakengraph) and OPL4. This game intends to make use full usage of the V9990 capabilities, and we are doing it by attempting to make a clone of the Capcom game called *King Of Dragons*. It is looking really good so far.

We have another project, which started a year ago but is in standby for now: a *Cabal*-style game for plain MSX2 but also supporting the V9990 chip where available. This game is set in the *Life On Mars* universe and it is intended as a prequel. We are also polishing the PC remake of *Life On Mars* on Steam – Kikstart.eu/life-mars-steam – and we are planning on a MSX2 and V9990 compatible sequel of *Life On Mars* for next year, which will look very similar to the PC remake.

Gaming REVIEWS

·DO YOU· REMEMBER?

Pryo the storm cloud is running wild and threatening to burn down all of the forests, so it falls to Koffi, the only rescue helicopter pilot available who has only just qualified for the job, to stop this mass deforestation. He'll need to collect water to put out the treetop fires, save creatures by leading them away from the blaze to safety and bounce off Pyro himself to defeat him, while avoiding lightning and fireballs.

Koffi: Yellow Kopter for the Atari 5200 has three stages of rescue work, followed by a confrontation with Pyro's less-than happy-mother before it loops around with a different colour scheme and harder difficulty. Kistart.eu/koffi-5200 goes to developer Ron 'Cafeman' Lloyd's website and there's an Atari 8-bit port available, too.



» [Atari 5200] What on Earth was a whale doing in the forest?



» [Atari 5200] Pyro's mother isn't happy that her son's destructive plans were thwarted.





» [C64] There's a sign near here saying not to feed the slimes.

RESCUING ORC

» **FORMAT:** COMMODORE 64 » **DEVELOPER:** JUAN J MARTÍNEZ » **DOWNLOAD:** KIKSTART.EU/RESCUING-ORC-C64 » **PRICE:** FREE DOWNLOAD, €20 TAPE, €33 CARTRIDGE



» [C64] "Excuse me, have you seen an Orc pass this way recently?"



» [C64] Why does this stone keep have a great big threatening button on the floor?

Deep in the Black Forest lives a Goblin, a surprisingly amiable denizen of the enchanted world of Magica, who likes nothing more than to meet with his friend Orc – who is, unsurprisingly, an Orc since the devs don't have much in the way of imagination – for a cuppa and a natter. It's, therefore, a rather worrying turn of events when these regular get-togethers unexpectedly stop – especially since nobody else has seen Orc for a couple of weeks – so our pointy-eared protagonist makes it his mission to find out what happened to his friend regardless of the danger that might entail.

A visit to Orc's home seems to be a good starting point in this curious case, however getting in without a key will be problematic. Fortunately, there's another entrance to be found, which in turn leads to the discovery of a note from Orc himself saying he's gone to visit the local Oracle, apparently on important business, although there isn't even a hint as to what said business might be. The trek to the Oracle's stronghold at the far side of the Rocky Mountains is an arduous one for our Goblin hero, with the path regularly being blocked by creatures – these can either be stunned or killed by a quick sword thrust – and other hazards to negotiate, but there are also clues to finding Orc's whereabouts to discover as well.

Rescuing Orc is a challenging task as pretty much everything the Goblin will encounter is hostile, apart from the occasional collectible items, such as keys, extra lives and helpful potions which absorb one enemy blow. The terrain isn't particularly forgiving, either, with most of the jumps requiring pretty precise positioning to clear successfully – something that's difficult when running away from an enraged Elf – and water-filled or spike-filled pits waiting below quite a few of them to claim one of the Goblin's lives. So it seems that, along with a trusty blade, one of the things required for this journey will be a decent joystick.

» **Score 77%**

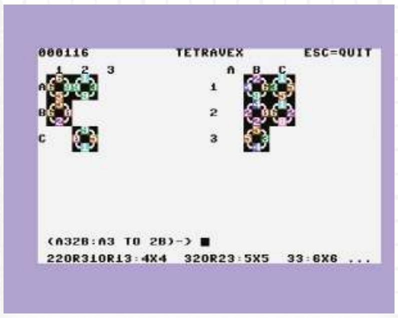


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RetroGamerUK @RetroGamer_Mag darran.jones@futurenet.com

TETRAVEX

» **FORMAT:** COMMODORE PLUS/4
» **DEVELOPER:** KÁROLY NAGY » **PRICE:** FREE
» **DOWNLOAD:** KIKSTART.EU/TETRAVEX-264

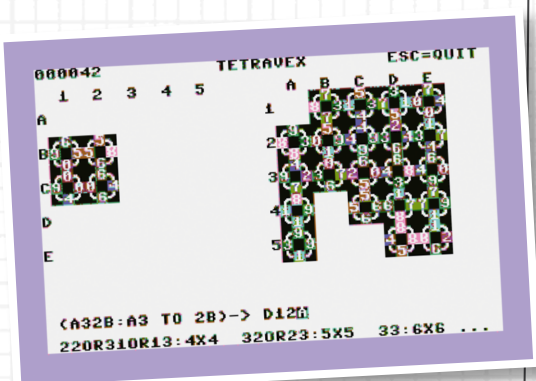


» [Plus/4] The edges were correct but everything needed moving.

Tetravex is a number puzzle which dishes out a simple assignment: move all of the tiles from the right-hand grid over to the left, positioning them so that the colour-coded numbers one their edges match those of the tiles they're touching. And, as is common with puzzlers like this, those rules seem very simple on the surface. But, of course, actually completing the puzzle will require some work.

The controls take a little acclimatisation with instructions sent as codes, such as B42E – and we'd have preferred a joystick-controlled cursor – but organising the tiles does become a surprisingly relaxing task. There's a clock in the corner, but it's only there so players can compare their time to previous attempts and, once the 3x3 squared version of the game has been mastered, it's possible to progress to four, five and even six-tile square playfields for a harder challenge.

» Score **84%**



» [Plus/4] Hopefully getting off to a good start with the 5x5 grid.



» [MSX] Teaching the mercenaries a harsh lesson about fire-breathing dragons.



» [MSX] All of this negative attention could make a dragon feel unwanted.

DRACONIC THRONE

» **FORMAT:** MSX » **DEVELOPER:** GW'S WORKSHOP
» **DOWNLOAD:** KIKSTART.EU/DRACONIC-MSX » **PRICE:** FREE

There are two things a would-be royal despot needs to control a country. The easier of the two is pulling together an army to keep the peasants from revolting, and that can be done simply by throwing money at the problem to hire and equip troops or bribe the local magic wielders. The second problem is significantly larger, and indeed more scaly, the land is protected by a dragon which must be defeated in combat.

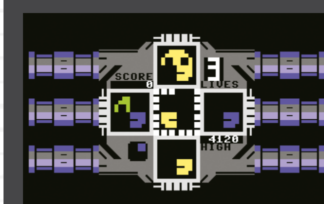
Draconic Age is a scrolling shoot-'em-up where the player-controlled dragon must blast the mercenaries on the ground and in the air before battling the Prince at his stronghold. The controls are complicated, but they allow the dragon's head to be aimed at ground-based and air-based threats, and it can survive countless hits from peasant weapons but each blow pushes it backwards until the left hand border is touched and the dragon admits defeat.

» Score **78%**

ROUNDUP

We've got something that's simultaneously new and old to start with: the memory-based puzzle game *Gedaechtnis* by Carsten Dost was released into the wild recently over at the CPCWiki forums but it was written in 1989. There are 132 tiles on the screen with objects hiding behind them, and players must take turns to either find pairs, which are worth ten points each, or memorise which object is where for future reference. Kikstart.eu/gedaechtnis-cpc takes you there.

Keeping with the puzzle-based theme, *Assembloids Basic* by István Maros is a version of the 2013 RGCD game it shares a title with, but it is written in BASIC. The gameplay is close to the original and the 'cracked' version we're linking to with Kikstart.eu/assembloids-basic-c64 has been compiled to make it a more responsive.



PAC-MAD

» **FORMAT:** ATARI 8-BIT » **DEVELOPER:** BOCIANU » **DOWNLOAD:** KIKSTART.EU/PAC-MAD-A8 » **PRICE:** FREE

Pac-Mad is a fast-paced copy of a certain arcade game with ghost-like creatures chasing a pill-eating yellow creature around a labyrinth. But it isn't a direct copy of Namco's classic, despite initially using its maze. The playfield scrolls as Pac travels around – which makes keeping track of the ghosts more difficult since they spend quite a bit of time left to their own devices off screen – and each stage has a different layout.

Making alterations to the well-established, reliable *Pac-Man* format is something of a minefield for game designers because there's always a chance of messing the entire game up by trying to wedge in a new feature, but this attempt doesn't go mad with the changes. The new level designs are sometimes a little fiddly to navigate and losing track of the enemies can be a problem, but *Pac-Mad* is still worth picking up a quick arcade fix.

» Score **75%**



» [Atari 8-bit] Mere inches away from turning the tables on those ghosts.





MAILBAG

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WIN! Every month, one lucky writer-in will receive a spanking copy of either our NES/Master System or SNES/Mega Drive books



BEAT THE TEAM

RIVER RAID



It's one of the best games on the Atari 2600, and more importantly one that doesn't allow Nick to farm for points, so we decided Carol Shaw's classic would be this month's challenge.



NICK **35,840**

"I'm reckless, maybe too reckless, with my fuel supply. I'll gladly shoot away supplies for a few more precious points, even if it means I'm running on empty 90 per cent of the time."



DREW **20,750**

"Playing this has revealed my Achilles heel: I can play phenomenally for the first life, sure, but as soon as I lose one life, I go on tilt. Full-on, let's drive-into-the-wall tilt."



DARRAN **14,500**

"When I saw Drew and Sam using a browser to play this I did the same for fairness. Big mistake! I'm left-handed and simply don't have the coordination. Guess who used a joystick…"



SAM **6,690**

"Personally, I found this more frustrating than last month's *Super Ghouls 'N' Ghosts* challenge. Do all Atari 2600 games play this badly? Yeah, I thought so."

STAR LETTER

RECIPE FOR DISASTER

Dear **Retro Gamer**,
I have been watching *The Great British Bake Off* a lot because I can't put my SNES Mini on the living room TV, and I think the mag should do a cooking section. I have given you the names of lots of recipe names below. You don't have to pay for them or anything. I don't actually know how to make them, so you will have to figure this bit out, but you are all pretty smart so you can manage it.

The recipe names are here: Mega Flan X; Cake III: Arena; Black (Pudding); Fusilli Frenzy; Pokémon Blueberry Muffin; Grand Theft Torte-o; The House Of The Bread; The Legend Of Zelda: A Link To The Pasta; Capcom Vs SNK 2: Millionaire Shortbread 2001; Shenmuesli; Pie-dro Thunder; Mash At Demonhead; Road Mash; Mash Bandicoot; Mash Team Racing; Bishi Mashi Special; Devil Mash; Mash TV; Cosmic Mash; Super Mash Bros Melee; Mario Kart: Double Mash; SNK Vs Capcom: Card Fighter's Mash; Mashback; Jumping Mash; Boulder Mash; Mash Court Tennis; Galerians: Mash and Burger Time.

Please don't use all of my ideas as I don't really like potatoes that much. Thanks.

Edward Frimley

As a team, we collectively feel like instead of trying to play the SNES Mini, you should take some time to work through the *Cooking Mama* series before you generate enough gaming food puns to shatter the very fabric of the English language. Either that or you should possibly be watching *Bodger & Badger* as a way of dealing with the mashed potato fixation you seem to have developed.

We probably won't add recipes (or "type-in oven listings") to Retro Gamer. Still, no matter what personal misfortune inspired you to do this, we got some amusement from it and for that you can have a bookazine. Enjoy!



» [Mega Drive] Here's the humble bin chicken, a staple food in the world of *Streets Of Rage II*…

BOOK IT

Hello **RG**,
I have a couple of requests regarding bookazines.
1: Any chance of a bookazine just about the Neo-Geo?
2: How about a bookazine, or even a regular issue just about the collecting (ie not necessarily playing) of games?

Gareth Crowley

There's a good chance that we could do a Neo-Geo bookazine – it's an idea that has been brought up before. A book dedicated to collecting is slightly less likely, but not something we'd ever rule out.

» Would we do a Neo-Geo bookazine? Never say never.



HOW SNOBBY ARE YOU?

Dear **Retro Gamer**,
Your Star Letter in issue 173 got me wondering – you say it's okay to enjoy retro gaming with any setup, but you're clearly more interested in retro games than the average guy on the street. So, what are *your* retro setups like? Do you fall closer to the snobbish or casual end of things?

Keith Patterson

The consoles in Darran's retro shed are hooked up to a Sony Trinitron CRT TV, with sound routed through a nice stereo system. Nick hooks his consoles up to a budget Celcus LCD TV, via an Open Source Scan Converter. Both of us use RGB SCART and prefer NTSC consoles where they offer the correct speed. Where necessary, they're also modded for 60Hz play. So it's fair to say that we prefer to chase a high-quality setup.

BOX

Hi **RG**,
I decided to take a plunge to Scarborough in order to purchase a tattered box that contained an original Xbox console from 2004, complete with controls and leads from CeX for 40 quid. I followed up with a still-sealed limited edition of *Marc Ecko's Getting Up* for a tenner from a shop called The Game Pad, then buying four games for a quid each from a charity shop in Pickering which were *Fable*, *Hitman: Blood Money*, *Call Of Duty: Finest Hour* and *Call Of Duty 2: Big Red One*. Having never played these games before when I first purchased the console, it was nice to play them (except the *still* sealed *Getting Up*) and have a blast with them. £54 well spent!

Cisko Kidd

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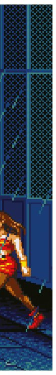
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Hopefully you'll have enjoyed our feature on the console this issue, then! There's lots of great stuff to be had on the original Xbox, and now is the best time to dip in as the games are mostly dirt cheap – we've seen absolute classics like *Halo* and *Project Gotham Racing* for as little as 50p each.

BAG (OF MAIL)

Dear **Retro Gamer**,

I think an interesting idea for an article in your magazine would be the history of play-by-mail games. It might seem like an odd topic for a videogame magazine, but not really when you consider that these games are run on computers and are still being played today by a devoted following. They are closer to videogames than board games. Likewise, if it wasn't for 1976's *Starweb*, who knows if there would have been videogames like *Master Of Orion*.

Without a doubt, play-by-mail games were almost like online gaming before the internet in how they provided a medium for players from all around the world to play and communicate with one another.



» [Xbox] Is Microsoft's original console the best value retro platform right now? *Fable* is easily worth a pound…

It's truly mind-blowing that some of the earliest play by mail games had upwards of 30 players (who even engaged in hidden movements) during the era of *Pong*.

I think that the industry founder, Rick Loomis from Flying Buffalo Inc, deserves more credit in playing a vital part in shaping the social and gaming dynamics of the last few decades. His name should be in the same elite category of computer pioneers like that of Gates, Jobs, Bushnell and Zuckerberg. Did you know that Rick Loomis was most likely the first person to have bought a computer for the sole purpose of playing games? That in itself is worth exploring.

Scott Sochocki

DISCUSSED THIS MONTH

Starsceptre

We get a large number of game submissions sent in to Retro Gamer, so they typically have to have a little something to make them stand out. Darran instantly took an interest in Starsceptre on iOS and Android because he's featured as a secret character. The birds are a particularly nice touch.



Thanks for the letter, Scott – and for those of you wondering, it did indeed come in by post rather than via email. The history of play-by-mail games is certainly an interesting idea for a feature. It does fall a bit outside the realm of videogames, into computer-assisted gaming, but we're not averse to it. Tell us, readers: does a look at the history of play-by-mail games tickle your fancy?



From the forum

Every month, **Retro Gamer** asks a question on the forum and prints the best replies. This month we wanted to know…

What's your favourite Xbox game?

lupogtiboy
The only game I spent any time on was *Project Gotham Racing*. A mate and me would challenge each other with lap times and just normal racing. It got quite intense at times!

Big Shoes
Halo, without a doubt, it got me back into gaming. Every month we would get 16 friends together, four Xbox consoles and four TVs and play *Halo* for hours, system link was amazing, still my best memory of gaming.

merman
Mashed: Fully Loaded is such a great party game, and challenging for a solo player as well. Love the silly samples too. "I banged my weirdly shaped head."

Ryan GH
It has to be *Panzer Dragoon Orta*. So beautiful and stunning to look at, and even more involving to play.

kiwimike
Xbox exclusive had to be *Halo*. Though *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* got the most gaming time on Xbox I think.

adippm82
It was the first machine that I played *Half-Life 2* on, and it was an amazing achievement on the hardware. It does struggle technically in a few places, but I loved it.

DRS
Oddworld: Stranger's Wrath. Loved the literal interpretation of 'live ammo'. A beautiful game that melded together so many different elements… still can't believe that even with EA publishing it, it didn't do better.



» [Xbox] *Panzer Dragoon* is a firm favourite on the **Retro Gamer** team, too, Ryan GH.

sirclive1
Loads of favourites but *Grabbed By The Ghoulies* is my pick.

jdanddiet
I think my overall is *Call Of Cthulhu: Dark Corners Of The Earth*. It's such an experience, still think about it today. If you fancy a challenge and don't mind a bit of stealth, it's a brilliant game the way it sucks you in.

ArchaicKoala
I actually bought an Xbox (and modded it) just to play *Tony Hawk 2x*, I imported the game from the US but it was definitely worth it! Why this was not released in the UK I'll never know.

retro GAMER

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ENDGAME



KNUCKLE HEADS: GREGORY'S ENDING

» Six skilled combatants enter America's hottest and deadliest game show, but only one can leave with the prize of a cool $10 billion. We've chosen to follow the story of Gregory Darrell, a man who sounds like he should be reporting the local news but is in fact a full-time Viking. What will he choose to spend his immense winnings on? Let's skip to the end and find out…

01



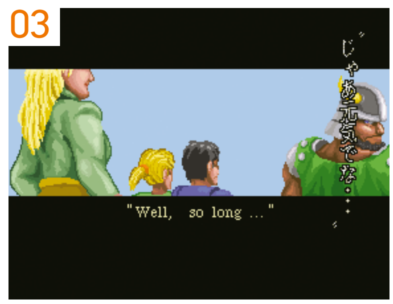
» Most people, upon winning the sum of $10 billion, would immediately start spending selfishly, but Gregory is a lonely man. His wife has divorced him and taken the kids – and it's they who are the beneficiaries of his victory.

02



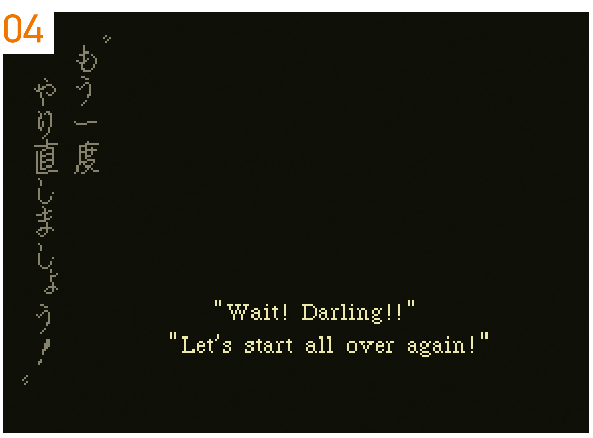
» You see, Gregory recognises that the selfishness of his seafaring lifestyle is what caused his divorce. But he bears no ill will towards his ex-wife, and wishes to make amends by at least providing proper support for his children.

03



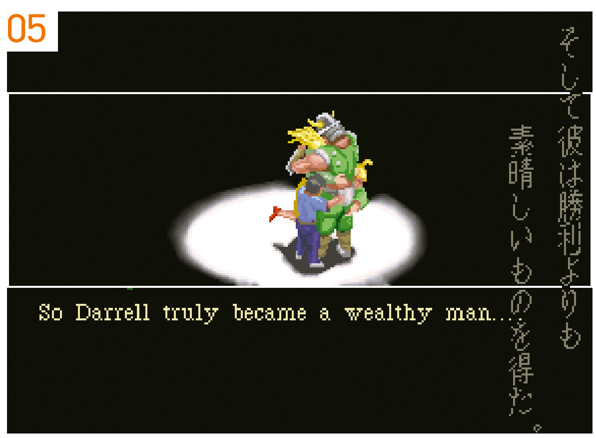
» Having done what he entered the competition to do, our hero prepares to depart, hoping to have made amends to his estranged family for his absentee lifestyle. Money can't hug the kids, but it can make sure they never go hungry.

04



» As she watches Gregory walk away from a fortune that could have comfortably been split, the former Mrs Darrell is overwhelmed by her ex-husband's selflessness. He didn't beg to come back, and he didn't ask for recognition – he just did a decent thing. Maybe this can work out after all.

05



» The whole family shares an embrace, reunited at last by a considerate action from an inconsiderate man. Well, that and lots and lots of filthy cash, earned by inflicting grave and possibly fatal injuries on other human beings. But let's try not to think about the ethics too much, yeah?


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